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## RISKING PUBLIC CREDIBILITY

"Wolf! Wolf!" they cried, and the fattened calves no longer came to market. This resulted because of fear that hormone-supplemented animal feed might lead to residues in meat and, upon consumption, such residues would induce cancer in those people ingesting such products.

"Wolf! Wolf!" they cried, and food store shelves were swept clean of cyclamate sweetener products, also out of fear of their alleged carcinogenicity.

"Wolf! Wolf!" they cried, and we witnessed the ludicrous sight of state highway crews in Maryland digging up roads in an effort to eliminate asbestos-containing gravel which also has been suspected of having carcinogenic properties.

And so on, we have witnessed a whole host of products indicted as cancer-causing agents that must be eliminated from the marketplace at any and all costs.

Initially, such accusations were made carefully, and only after reasonable proof was produced, as in the case with smoking as a causative factor with regard to lung, throat, and mouth cancer. But the movement rapidly has escalated in more recent years to the point where reckless charges are leveled and corrective actions are quickly initiated on the basis of only the most meager evidence. It is almost as if the political excesses of the French Revolution, or of the Senator McCarthy era in the United States, had been revived in the guise of misdirected science and runaway regulation.

Smoked bacon, charcoal-grilled steaks, chlorine-treated drinking water, plastic soft drink bottles, fire-resistant treated sleepwear, hair dyes, and saccharin are just a few of the many other familiar products which have been tarred with the broad brush of "carcinogenic" often on the flimsiest of grounds.

But recently there are signs that the broad swing of the pendulum may have reached its zenith and that it is returning toward reasonableness.

"Regulation" in its general sense appears to be growing less popular with President Carter and his White House advisors. The President's economic report to Congress in late January suggested that compliance with overzealous environmental, health, and safety regulations represents a big drag on productivity. Although regulation is certainly worthwhile, the report went on to declare that "regulation is very costly; benefits should be closely compared with costs."

But even more targeted to the cancer-scare phobia discussed above, we were gratified to read some words of sanity coming from a very unexpected source—the Consumer Product Safety Commission, a relative new-comer agency on the federal scene, and one that on other matters has generated a rather deserved label of being "an extremist in the pursuit of safety."

No less than the vice-chairman of the CPSC, Commissioner Barbara Hackman Franklin, has been telling a variety of public and private groups such down-to-earth things as: "You can't just ban things because they cause cancer. That's too simple."

Our scientist-readers may not be impressed with this statement, but in politically-sensitive Washington to speak such truths is seen as career-suicide or even heresy. Heads have been known to roll for much less reason.

But as Commissioner Franklin wisely has pointed out in a series of speeches she has delivered over the past year: *Consumers are confused and being increasingly "turned off" by the bombardment of warnings about the cancer-causing potential of many products. People want answers about causes of cancer, but they are frustrated by the proliferation of cancer warnings.*

She has been preaching a message in her talks across the country that we need to generate a unified, thoughtful, and well-reasoned approach to regulatory actions intended to protect the public against real cancer threats. She has even addressed President Carter on several occasions with specific proposals to "plot an effective course of action which would make sense for industry, government, and most of all, for consumers—those who feel increasingly confused or cynical."

Commissioner Franklin appears to be saying to all who will listen that we can only tell people "Wolf! Wolf!" so often before both scientists and political leaders lose their credibility on the subject. Then the public will not believe us even when something comes along with a 100% fatality rate in submicro quantities!

—EGF