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Op-Ed

‘A Very Nasty Business’

Judging by what's happened to the Health Protection Branch, the Liberals place appeasement of the drug industry ahead of protecting public health.

By Michael McBane

If you want a good look at what's going on at the Health Protection Branch, read the testimony of five HPB scientists who recently appeared at the Senate agriculture committee studying the effect of the bovine growth hormone for human and animal safety. They spoke under oath about pressure and coercion to approve drugs of questionable safety, stolen files, attempted bribes, and gag orders.

Health Canada's new Deputy Minister, David Dodge was later grilled by senators. Senator Joyce Fairbairn had this to say to Dodge: "Our confidence in our country has been shaken. It has been shaken through problems with the blood supply, and through situations such as those at Sick Children's Hospital in Toronto which involve research on children ... The drug rBST has now become a symbol of that anxiety ... As public policy makers, the notion that health safety is taking second place to money and industry is really unacceptable".

Canadians have good cause to view the Health Protection Branch as a major threat to health. There are presently \$8 billion in lawsuits against Health Canada from victims of contaminated blood and breast implants alone. The RCMP is conducting four separate criminal investigations of wrong-doing at the Health Protection Branch.

The branch's budget for food safety research has been cut from \$63 million in 1993-4 to \$22 million this year, with 32 food safety research positions eliminated. Three hundred food inspectors have already been dumped and meat-packing plants will conduct their own inspections. The entire Bureau of Drug Research has been dismantled. Many of the Branch's internationally renowned food and drug scientists have been forced to move to the United States or retire.

Program Review cuts and the closing of food and drug labs in the branch could not be implemented without deregulation, or as they say in Ottawa "re-thinking government business lines". I suspected that deregulation was the policy driving the changes at the branch. In a September 25th meeting between representatives of the Canadian Health Coalition and the new Deputy Minister of Health, I got my chance to ask David Dodge directly.

I had mixed emotions about the straight answers he gave to my questions: "We see it as a risk management issue with objectives other than regulation." Dodge said this approach goes back to

the Nielsen Task Force which pointed out that “government became too mesmerized with regulatory processes”.

Dodge’s reference to Erik Nielsen’s 1985 Task Force on Regulatory Programs, as the policy guide for changes at the branch, was both surprising and worrisome. The Main Overview states that the Task Force “concentrated on regulatory problems as seen and defined by the private sector and only secondarily as seen from the point of view of government”. The effect of regulation, it adds “constitutes an enormous impediment to initiative, enterprise and personal freedom”.

Dodge went on to say that where we are at with health protection is not tenable. “We have to operate in the face of uncertainty. The whole process is now geared to not making decisions. This highlights the role of science and risk management. We have to reach out and get the science and information and deal with it. The regulatory approach is an old-fashioned way to deal with risk.”

When I hear the man running the federal Department of Health refer to health protection regulations as an old-fashioned way to deal with risk, I get scared. I think about what Dr. Gerry Bonham told me about the history of public health policy. He pointed out that one small regulation dealing with safe packaging had greater impact on reducing pre-school poisonings than twenty years of education programs for mothers and expensive poison control centres. An ounce of prevention should never go out of fashion.

The shift from regulation to risk management may sound innocent enough. I knew Dodge understood the real implications when he said: “Making these decisions is a very nasty piece of business”. As the architect of the massive federal cuts to transfer payments for health and social programs, Dodge isn’t afraid to make nasty decisions. His new task is to convince citizens that some deaths and illnesses are acceptable even when they are preventable at minimal cost.

Dodge says we have to make decisions in the face of uncertainty. Does this mean, in the case of the bovine growth hormone for example, that a 90 day study of male rats with their pituitary glands removed is sufficient basis to assess the safety of rBST? In a risk management framework, uncertainty is “managed” in the interests of manufacturers at the expense of human and animal health. Safety becomes just another trade-off.

The Food and Drugs Act says the minister’s duty is to protect from health hazards and fraud, not to manage risks. Here’s where Health Canada’s “consultations” on the future of its Health Protection Branch “legislative renewal” come in. Called “HPB Transition”, discussion papers invite the public to participate in the transition to risk management and “shared responsibility”. Canadians’ charter of safety rights - the Food and Drugs Act - is described as a run-down ‘53 Dodge that has to be scrapped. According to internal documents obtained through Access to Information, the Act’s biggest flaw is “inflexibility on safety”.

To anyone else who gets close enough to see what’s happening at the Health Protection Branch, it is believable that this is the preferred future the Chrétien government has planned for Canadians. Will they get away with implementing an agenda from the Brian Mulroney era? Not if people become aware of Liberal government’s moral deficit.