

The Top 10 Public Health Travesties of 2005 (from National Review Online and the Washington Times)

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EDITORIAL

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More darts than laurels should be distributed in 2005 in the fields of public health and health journalism. Here are the year's Top Ten health absurdities:

1. Harvard's School of Public Health bestowed its highest award for public-health achievement on Erin Brockovich. Brockovich claimed trace levels of the chemical chromium-6 caused diseases in a California community. She orchestrated a \$330 million settlement from a utility company — pocketing a couple million herself. There was no evidence that the chemical traces made anyone sick, but that didn't deter Dean Barry Bloom from honoring her for "efforts on behalf of all of us."
2. Iowa banned the use of the preservative thimerosal in childhood vaccines (over 20 states are considering similar laws), though the mainstream medical community is unanimous in its conclusion that the additive is safe. The restriction makes it more difficult to protect children and adults from diseases — such as a possible avian-flu pandemic.
3. Environmentalists claimed that toothpaste, antiperspirant, lipstick, and eyeliner cause cancer. As usual, there was no human data to back up the claims, but some cosmetic companies yielded to the chemo-terrorists and reformulated their products, passing the costs — but no benefits — on to consumers.
4. When McDonald's announced that it would put nutrition information, including caloric content, on its wrappers, the Ralph Nader inspired "food police" were outraged. Instead of serving up compliments, they issued stinging criticisms — insisting the nutrition data belonged on the menu boards as well.
5. The EPA, claiming PCBs cause cancer, prevailed in its case against General Electric, forcing GE to begin removing traces of the chemicals from the Hudson River. The National Cancer Institute says there is no evidence that exposure to PCBs causes human cancer. The cost of the cleanup — an estimated \$750 million — will be passed on to consumers and shareholders.
6. To fight obesity, schools around the U.S. banned vending machines dispensing soda, even diet soda — replacing it with calorie-laden apple juice.
7. Having won major settlements against Big Tobacco, the same attorneys plotted lawsuits against Big Food — claiming food companies are legally accountable for the nation's obesity epidemic. Plaintiff lawyers dismiss individual responsibility for nutrition decisions, saying soft-drink companies use caffeine to addict children to "empty calories."
8. The news this year about preventing deaths from breast cancer was apparently too good to report: The media gave short shrift to this spring's Lancet article noting that breast-cancer death rates were plummeting. There was scant coverage of the fact that new pharmaceuticals, in conjunction with standard treatments, now prevent almost all recurrences of breast cancer in women with early-stage disease.
9. Kevin Trudeau's book on *Natural Cures* which argues that "medical science has absolutely, 100 percent failed in the curing and prevention of disease," and says that tap water can kill you and that organic food is our only hope — is one of 2005's best-selling advice books.
10. Republican and Democratic lawmakers urged "drug importation" from price-controlled countries (like Canada) to lower U.S. drug prices. They didn't tell consumers that a) drug-importation plans are a Trojan horse that is sneaking price controls into the United States and b) countries with price controls do not generate new blockbuster drugs. If such policies were in place here,

restricting financial incentives, the current pace of drug innovation and development would be a thing of the past.

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