

Cancer Society Ducks Issues, Misuses Clout, Critics Claim

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 Second of Two Parts

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WASHINGTON — The American Cancer Society once ranked with motherhood and apple pie as a great institution with virtues beyond dispute.

No longer. The world's biggest nonreligious charity (2.3 million volunteer solicitors, \$114 million in donations last year) has botched the war on cancer, according to critical scientists.

The cancer society has "dodged" positions on environmental and industrial cancer-causing substances, Dr. Donald Kennedy, commissioner of the Food and Drug Administration, charged.

"I have to confess I don't have much use for the ACS," complained a senior congressional staff aide who would like the cancer society's help lobbying for health and environmental legislation. "They came

down (to lobby) for the Cancer Act (of 1971), but where are they when you need them?"

Even on the anti-smoking front, in which the cancer society claims leadership, "the national organization (of the society) has never participated in a judicial, regulatory or legislative petition related to smoking," griped activist John Banzhaf, founder of Action on Smoking and Health, a group as aggressive as it is poor.

"I've approached them, many times," Banzhaf said.

FROM PAGE 1A

"Their answer is, 'It's too controversial. We don't want to get involved in anything controversial.'"

That's the gist of the critics' gripes: The cancer society has great power but is too stodgy and conservative to use it, particularly where cancer prevention is concerned.

Instead, critics charge, the society uses its political clout in self-interested ways — first to lobby for more federal money for cancer research and treatment, then to dominate the government panels dealing out the money. Not surprisingly, most big cancer research and treatment centers have close links to the cancer society.

"The ACS works like a money pump," said a critical congressional aide. "In effect, their hand reaches right into the appropriations pocket."

To an unknowable extent, all such criticisms reflect envy of the society's wealth and power. Despite the highly visible failure to make major headway in curing cancer, the American Cancer Society has undisputed leadership in educating the public about cancer and in promoting early detection and patient rehabilitation.

Further, many scientists think the society has been more ingenious and bold in its research investments — \$32 million last year — than federal agencies spending 20 times that.



THE WAR ON CANCER

And even cancer-war critics give the society credit for bringing vital attention to the disease.

IF THE METHODS and motives of the society are complex, one fact is clear: It has been the most powerful influence in the cancer war for decades.

It also has political power: 2,900 chapters blanketing the nation, a paid staff of more than 3,000, an active volunteer staff of 300,000, and 2.3 million solicitors during the fund-raising crusade every April.

"We're the biggest crusade since the Crusades," boasted Nathaniel Polster, the society's Washington lobbyist. At reelection time, one former congressional campaign manager estimated, "Recognition by the cancer society is worth 2 or 3 per cent of the vote. They have clout and they all vote."

None of that clout, though, has been used to push for legislation like the Clean Air, Clean Water and Toxic Substances acts — measures intended, in part, to reduce exposure to cancer-causing substances, and all controversial.

AND THE society declined to take a position during regulatory hearings on suspected cancer-causers like the pesticides aldrin and dieldrin, the food additive Red Dye No. 2, the fire retardant Tris, and forms of synthetic estrogen.

For this passivity, one federal regulator called the cancer society "the infantile society for national paralysis."

The society's reluctance to take a stand on these issues stems in some measure from its basic philosophy. Essentially, it has been dedicated to the idea that, given enough research, the disease can be cured. And it was by encouraging optimism about curing cancer that the society won ever-larger cancer war budgets in the early '70s.

Those who have grown disillusioned by the failure to find a cure, who talk of defeating cancer by reducing or ending human exposure to tobacco, industrial pollutants and food additives, are advocating an entirely different approach: prevention rather than cure.

THIS GROUP now includes health activists of every stripe and some top officials in Congress and the Carter Administration.

One sign of their growing influence was President Carter's rejection of the cancer society's candi-

date for director of the National Cancer Institute, the leading federal agency in the war on cancer. Instead Carter picked Dr. Arthur Upton, a preventionist.

Reacting to this challenge, Polster, the cancer-society lobbyist, said the society's low profile in fighting industrial chemicals and other possible cancer-causers simply has been prudent.

"The signals from scientists just weren't clear enough," he said. "I don't think you'll ever find the ACS taking a position when the issue involves serious scientific controversy, and that's often the case in regulatory matters."

Indeed, cancer prevention is controversial. Some scientists say it is a substance, such as saccharin causes cancer in laboratory animals, even if only at extraordinarily high doses, human exposure should be kept to a minimum, whatever the cost.

OTHERS, who are less absolute in their judgments, say that at least some hazard to humans should be proved before taking any legal precautions beyond requiring prudent use.

The latter position, normally taken by industries affected by proposed regulations, also has been adopted by the cancer society. It leaves both industry and the society open to the charge of being willing to use humans as guinea pigs — of waiting until it can be proven that someone contracted cancer from exposure, say, to a chemical.

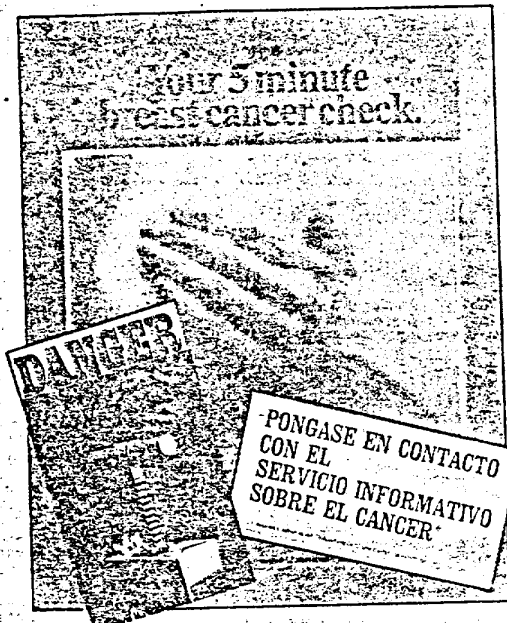
Alert to the stakes, aware that its critics are gaining ears in Congress, and alarmed that Carter and Congress have put the lid on cancer funds, the cancer society has begun to react.

Last fall, it dropped its aloofness to testifying on bills and regulations and organized a "public-issues" committee to design lobbying strategies. In January, the society published a report critical of its own performance on smoking and vowed support for the anti-smoking crusade declared by Joseph Califano, secretary of Health Education and Welfare.

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American Cancer Society Posters

... one program that ran into trouble

IN FEBRUARY, the society got a new lobbyist: Marvella Bayh, wife of Sen Birch Bayh (D., Ind.), a popular Washington hostess and a breast-cancer victim. One of her first assignments was to arrange background briefings on the society and the cancer crusade for skeptical Capitol Hill staffers.

"More and more the ACS is going to take public positions," vowed Dr. Frank Rauscher, a cancer-society senior vice president and former director of the National Cancer Institute. "If I can find the time," he said, the society will address both the influence of diet on cancer, an upcoming federal issue, and the hottest issue today: tightening regulations on workplace exposure to cancer-causing chemicals.

All such activism — like the trend toward preventionism — tears at the roots of what the cancer society is.

CHARTERED "to conquer cancer ... through a balanced program of research, education and patient service and rehabilitation," its first constituency is cancer patients and physicians. About 50,000 doctors, most of them surgeons, radiologists, chemotherapists and others heavily concerned with treatment, serve on policy boards at all levels of the society. Logically, cancer treatment and cure are their primary concerns.

Because by-laws require that laymen fill half the positions on its policy-making boards, the society



Mary Lasker
... philanthropist

'Her (Mary Lasker) way to lick cancer is to find something simple: A simple pill that a simple physician can give to a suffering patient, which you're not going to find by wandering around asbestos factories.'

— Nathaniel Polster,
ACS lobbyist

also has a strongly conservative, volunteerist orientation. Of the society's influential big givers, a veteran staff officer said: "They are people congenitally or by experience mistrustful of big government ... They pay taxes by force. But they feel good about giving money to the voluntary agency."

Despite allegations to the contrary, the society gets little money from industry. Between 1958 and 1960 it withdrew from United Way fund drives, industry's traditional mode of charitable giving. In 1977 only 2.9 per cent of the society's donations come directly from industry.

BECAUSE of its size — and because the national headquarters survives by taking 40 per cent of each division's funds — the society is deeply concerned about harmony in its vast volunteer corps. "You don't want to rock the boat," says Polster, the society's lobbyist. "You don't want to get divided into Republican and Democrat volunteers."

"You have to realize that part of the volunteer spirit is the feeling that government is too big and getting bigger," says Polster, "and that the more things we do for ourselves, the less tax we'll have to pay. Now, if we accommodated some of the activists who want more government regulation, pretty soon our organization would be di-

vided between activists and our more traditional volunteers."

Equally important are the attitudes of the national leaders who created the society, heaped decline the cancer war, lobby actively for federal funding and represent the elite of the cancer establishment.

BY ALL accounts, the most ardent and successful of the cancer-society establishment is Mary Lasker, a New York philanthropist now in her late 70s who still drops in on Capitol Hill half a dozen times a year, bearing charts and reports for influential congressmen.

"She's great. Nobody lobbies as well or has the access Mary Lasker does," said an aide to the Senate subcommittee on Health and Scientific Research.

One reason: Since the '50s, Mrs. Lasker, the widow of Albert Lasker, a highly successful advertising executive, has ranked among the top 20 individual contributors to congressional campaigns. In 1974, the last election in which contributions were indexed by contributor, she gave \$43,456 to 25 candidates.

The biggest gifts (\$5,000 and \$3,000 respectively) went to Sen. Warren Magnuson (D., Wash.) and Rep. Daniel Flood (D., Pa.), chairmen of the two appropriations committees overseeing the National Cancer Institute's budget. Other leading Democrats and Republicans on the appropriations committees received \$1,000 or more each. Between 1972 and 1976 the National Cancer Institute's appropriation rose from \$279 million to \$315 million.

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LASKER DOES not grant newspaper interviews, but her interests are well-known. "Her way to lick cancer," said society lobbyist Polster, "is to find something simple: A simple pill that a simple physician can give to a suffering patient, which you're not going to find by wandering around asbestos factories." If "a simple pill" sounds like an impossible dream to most cancer scientists, Lasker is said to believe they are too pessimistic.

Now honorary chairman of the board of the cancer society, Lasker led a group of influential New York business and advertising leaders in the 1945 take over of the society's relatively lethargic predecessor, the American Society for the Control of Cancer. It had consisted entirely of doctors oriented toward treatment and had subsisted on about \$50,000 a year, giving no money to research.

With the help of advertising wizard Emerson Foote, pharmaceuticals executive Elmer Bobst and a handful of others, Lasker's re-christened American Cancer Society raised \$4,292,000 in its first fund drive and allocated \$960,000 for research.

ONE BIG success secret: great media relations. In 1946, Lasker talked The Reader's Digest into a three-part cancer update, each article closing with an appeal for donations to the new society. In 1977, when the society-dominated breast-cancer detection program came under attack, The Reader's Digest published the society's reassurances, written by a freelance writer who does work for both the Digest and the cancer society.

Annually in March, just before the cancer society's fund-raising crusade begins, the nation's science writers gather at a society-sponsored conference for briefings on the latest cancer research. Their stories help focus the nation's attention on cancer just as the collectors are coming around.

Until 1956, the society was so successful at fund-raising that its research outlay outstripped the federal government's. When the government took the lead, former Sen. Lister Hill (D., Ala.) and other Lasker friends were the prime movers. When that lead faltered, and former President Nixon trimmed the cancer budget by 3 per cent in 1969, Lasker's allies in Congress saved the day by creating a Panel of Consultants on the Conquest of Cancer.

A LIST of the consultant panelists and a review of their impact suggest how the cancer establishment works.

Co-chairmen were Dr. Sidney Farber, head of the Boston Children's Cancer Research Foundation, a friend of Lasker and an advocate of faster relay of research from lab to patient care; and Dr. Lee Clark, director and surgeon-in-chief of Houston's M.D. Anderson Hospital and Tumor Institute, the nation's second biggest cancer research and

treatment center. Clark and Farber long had been active with the society; Clark was its president last year.

Other society leaders on the panel were Dr. Jonathan Rhoads, a surgeon and cancer-society president; Elmer Bobst, past board chairman and G. Keith Funston, a society director.

The biggest cancer center, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Institute in New York, had three representatives and Lasker herself picked five laymen from her personal friends. One of them, Dr. Solomon Garb, a pharmacologist, had written an inspiring book: *Cure For Cancer: A National Goal*.

THE PANEL'S main recommendation: "A commitment to make the cure . . . of cancer a national goal, in the same way that putting a man into orbit around the earth was made a national goal and then achieved."

The recommendation was embraced by both Congress and President Nixon. And in 1971, only two years after cutting the cancer budget, Nixon declared the national crusade to conquer the disease.

Since 90 per cent of the National Cancer Institute's research and treatment funds eventually goes to outside doctors and researchers as grants or contracts, the result of the Conquest Panel report was more money for the panelists, and their colleagues and friends.

In action, the interrelationships can be almost mind-boggling. Take the case of Dr. Philippe Shubik, a pioneer researcher in environmental causes of cancer. Shubik, 49, heads the Eppley Institute for Research in Cancer at the University of Nebraska, which has done almost \$20 million in contract research for the National Cancer Institute. Shu-

bik is also a senior member of the National Cancer Advisory Board overseeing the National Cancer Institute's environmental-cancer program.

Shubik also serves as a paid consultant to a number of firms concerned about potential cancer-causing substances in their products. In 1977, that list included Procter and Gamble Co., Colgate-Palmolive Co., General Foods, Royal Crown Cola, Aobott Laboratories, Miles Laboratories and the Extract Manufacturers Association.

WITH THIS complex of interests, Shubik has led several policy initiatives at the National Cancer Institute that might be in his personal favor: In 1975, he was chairman of a committee that decided environmental cancer — his field — should rate more federal attention. A year later, he headed a cancer institute panel that modified the broad language that federal regulators and lawyers used in defining a cancer-causing substance. Asked



Marvella Bayh
... victim, lobbyist

whom he represented in the refining, which turned out to neither strengthen nor weaken the federal hand. Shubik's answer at the time was "Procter and Gamble."

In the past, Shubik has insisted that good environmental-cancer expertise is hard to find. And industry, he has said, deserves his expertise as much as government. When the issue later became controversial, Shubik vowed to drop his industrial clients. It was impossible to learn if he'd done so.

THIS MINOR embarrassment followed on the heels of a major one, involving a project in which the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute were partners. When the Cancer Act passed in 1971, the institute had asked for cancer-society suggestions on ways to spend the money. Tops on the list was a proposal to screen 280,000 women for breast cancer. The five-year, \$59 million project, 80 per cent funded by the National Cancer Institute, began in 1973.

Part of the testing involved using X-rays in a procedure called mammography.

The project, which has thus far found more than 2,500 tumors, ran into deep trouble when scientists grew worried that the risk of exposing women to radiation might exceed the benefit of finding early cancers.

In 1976, three panels of experts concluded the tests were inadvisable for women under 50, unless they specifically had a high risk of cancer.

Had the screening effort been an untarnished success, it would have been hailed as an exciting example of private-public partnership in medicine. The same might be said of the entire war on cancer.

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