

Letter from . . . Chicago

Rabbit Two

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In the 12 years since the last Year of the Rabbit our preoccupations have changed very little. There is even something cyclical about the periodic squalls between the legislative and executive branches of government, embodied then in Watergate and now in so called Irangate. But the issue this time is less clear cut. Is it about which branch of government should be conducting foreign policy? Or is it, as Professor Peter Drucker sees it,¹ a violation of some of the basic principles of good management?

Foremost among these Mr Drucker considers the error of confusing delegation with abdication of responsibility. Whether this indeed was the case in the present Washington affair remains as yet unclear. But the principle is important. Several presidents during this century, Mr Drucker points out, were excellent administrators, delegating most tasks but staying on top of things and demanding regular reports and briefings. Everybody knows that in business delegation without follow through is a prescription for disaster. In science the recent epidemic of fraudulent publications has been attributed on several occasions to directors of laboratories confusing delegation with abdication of responsibility. And the confusion carries over to medicine, to how attending physicians in teaching hospitals interact with their house officers. Here the spectrum is wide. On the abdicating side there is the bureaucratic physician who merely satisfies the Medicare functionaries by signing his name in all the correct places in the chart. The ceremonial physician parades through the ward grandly, shaking hands and making appropriate remarks, like a foreign dignitary on tour. The scientific abdicator discusses one interesting case at the blackboard in the side room, satisfied by the resident's assurance that the other patients are well. In the middle is the golden mean, so hard to achieve. And at the other extreme the non-delegated seven hour ward round causes fallen arches in interns and varicose veins in nurses yet is often ineffective, reminiscent of a recent president spending his time drawing up the schedules for playing tennis on the White House courts.

Another violation of good management principles, most apparent in Watergate, occurs when the chief allows himself to be isolated by overzealous assistants. These not only take over many of the chief executive's functions but also prevent him from being exposed to a wide enough range of opinions to allow him to make the right decision. The counterpart in medical academic or hospital departments occurs when an insecure chief surrounds himself with young yes men who tell him what he likes to hear, a more comfortable experience than putting up with the more independently minded senior department members.

Varying prices for giraffes

Another continuing preoccupation remains the economy, better than 12 years ago, but often difficult to assess despite reports and economic indicators because the mood changes all the time, as reflected also in the fluctuations of the stock market. This year the mood was good in the first quarter, despite the twin budget and trade deficits. But lately the mood has soured somewhat in the wake of the decline in the value of the dollar, some increase in interest rates, and hints of a return of a more inflationary environment. Yet prices vary greatly, from the \$12.50 attractive sports jacket I surreptitiously bought in a factory outlet ("Made in Turkey"—but inside pocket on the wrong side) to the \$600 models I did *not* buy while sightseeing at Saks Fifth Avenue in New York. Zoo prices vary likewise, a local giraffe being five times less costly than one brought from Africa—even though every organ is in the right place. You can buy a baby hippo for \$400 but must pay \$1 million for a pair of Chinese giant pandas. A female zebra costs \$2000 but a male, discriminatorily, only \$500. Bird lovers may purchase a penguin for \$1000; the price of turtle doves, calling birds, honking geese, and swans a swimming has not changed; but the entire Twelve Days of Christmas Index (like the Dow Jones) has gone up because the rise in the price of gold outweighed the decline in the price of eight cows on the farm. In the city, meanwhile, federal employees may keep their jobs by purchasing a bag of drug free urine for a mere \$49.99.

It has become much more expensive, however, to execute criminals—about \$4-7 million. This escalation reflects neither the cost of the electricity nor the hangmans' union contract but merely the legal fees spent on appeals. Yet estimates of the worth of a single human life vary widely. They range from \$9 by the metal trade, \$10 000 by contract murderers, up to \$500 000 by insurance companies, \$650 083 by the Federal Aviation Administration, \$400 000 to \$7 million by the Environmental Protection Agency, and infinity by some philosophers. Added costs and confusion arise from thousands of people blurring the bounds between this life and the next by reaching out of the grave and voting in Chicago elections. In this they join many who have long moved away and some who never existed in the first place, at least according to allegations made by the opposition.

Also potentially inflationary is the recent decision to allow the patenting of animals with manmade characteristics not found in nature. Altering the number of an oyster's chromosomes can improve its sweetness, and soon there may be cows that give more milk but not, one hopes, murderous Frankensteins and blood sucking Draculas. Yet what is one to make of the reported attempt to cross fertilise *in vitro* a man with a gorilla? But tomatoes are being bred to become bigger and tastier, and even squarer so they can be fitted neatly into boxes. Permission to patent bacteria recently culminated in the historic spraying of a strawberry field with Frostban or ice minus, a bacterium with altered deoxyribonucleic acid that may prevent \$1.6 billion of frost induced damage to plants. But activists and environmentalists were displeased, some demonstrating in specially designed T shirts, others vandalising the strawberry field, and others quietly wondering how soon a mutated deadly bacterium will be released into susceptible populations to

boost the prospects of antibiotics manufacturers and infectious disease specialists.

Meanwhile infectologists must remain content with common or garden organisms, some even less exotic than the St Louis encephalitis outbreak of 12 years ago. Instead we have measles; rubella in New Hampshire leading to the cancellation of athletic events in colleges; and an outbreak of mumps, with Illinois accounting for 40% of the almost 7000 cases reported in the United States in 1986. Apparently some 25% of Illinois's two million schoolchildren are susceptible because the compound vaccine offered before 1975 did not include protection against mumps. As a result the state has mounted a crash inoculation programme to avoid the later development of a more severe form of postpubertal mumps, often complicated by orchitis, pancreatitis, deafness, encephalitis, or oophoritis. Other sources of viral irritation are influenza, less than 25% of high risk elderly and 10% of youths having received the vaccine, and hepatitis B, where present low acceptance rates for the vaccine may be improved with the new yeast recombinant preparation.

Meanwhile a Melbourne psychiatrist has postulated that a slow virus may cause schizophrenia, infecting infants but lying dormant until it begins to cause symptoms after puberty. In California a psychiatrist concluded from antibody titre studies that some cases of depression may be caused by reactivation of an underlying Epstein-Barr virus infection; and another virus, called H4N5, may have been responsible for the deadly beaching of some 26 whales at Cape Cod last winter. Also pathogenic is "affluenza," the virus of inherited wealth, striking young people with guilt, boredom, lack of motivation, and delayed emotional development. Some rich children grow up secretive, suspicious that people are after their money; others end up by giving their money away or financing cults and other bizarre projects. Some overdose on drugs or die in accidents. Others just do nothing. Yet the cure, to abolish the inheritance of wealth, has never worked, not even when the Bolsheviks tried it after the revolution of 1917.

Tough laws against smoking

Perhaps more successful has been the campaign against smoking. Yet smoking, according to the American Lung Association, still kills 350 000 Americans and causes medical and industrial losses in excess of \$50 billion a year. While more than 40 million people have stopped smoking, 31% of adults and 20% of high school seniors still smoke. But in Minnesota one township has expanded on the state's 1975 Clean Indoor Act by banning smoking in parks, parking lots, and several other outdoor areas—to avoid bad examples, keep the air clean, and perhaps make the township a model for the rest of the nation. Several states, notably New York, have passed tough laws

forbidding smoking in most public places and having large restaurants set aside as much as 70% of their space for non-smokers. Even more drastic was the suggestion that the government should attack smoking at its roots by banning the manufacture of cigarettes, though not forbidding their use—thus avoiding the abuses that occurred here during the prohibition. Not that smokers are taking all this lying down; and in New York, as well as in California, they have gone to court to protest against banning of smoking in public places as a violation of their constitutional rights.

So far the federal agency overseeing airplanes has decided against a total ban of cigarette smoking in the air, planning instead to study the effects of smoke drifting from smoking to non-smoking areas. But insurance companies are considering increasing the health care premiums of smokers. And in corporate America, where few people smoke and most smell sweet, smokers are beginning to feel like outcasts, often being viewed with distaste as weak and lacking self control. Increasingly, smoking affects the chances of being hired or promoted, especially if the breath smells sour and the clothes musty; and employees have been fired for defying the rule of smoking only in designated areas. Hard days may lie ahead for the tobacco industry, hence understandably the sign "thank you for smoking" in the lobby of one of the large tobacco corporations.

Yet even a smokeless environment may not keep cancer at bay. Where 12 years ago we worried about bacon we now fret about alcohol increasing the incidence of breast cancer and sunlight turning dysplastic naevi into melanomas, especially in fair skinned people with positive family histories. Much has also been written about the dangers of non-ionising electromagnetic radiation emanating from electricity. Seeking refuge under a tree will not help if a high voltage transmission line runs over your head, microwave ovens are also suspect, and hiding under your electric blanket may cause abortion, if not leukaemia. The Environmental Protection Agency worries that formaldehyde, used as glue in the walls of three million mobile homes as well as in industry, may cause cancer, especially of the nasopharynx. All fibres are now suspect, not only asbestos but also fibreglass, rock wool, and ceramic fibres, studies suggesting that it is the shape rather than the material that counts, long thin fibres penetrating more deeply into the lungs and then inducing tumours. Perhaps the best way to survive until the next Year of the Rabbit might be to hide under a large leaf in a cabbage patch and munch carrots. Better still, take a leaf out of Lewis Carroll and go down a rabbit hole—though staying clear of the Mad Hatter with his high tissue levels of mercury or manganese.

Reference

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What are the risks to a pregnant mother and her fetus if one of her children receives oral polio vaccine, given that she is either unimmunised or has not received a booster dose of the vaccine for some time? Could any infection be potentially teratogenic?

Family contacts of individuals receiving live polio (Sabin) vaccine undoubtedly become infected and immunised as the result of virus spread. Thus the proportion of the United Kingdom population immunised against polio is some 5-10% higher than the proportion actually vaccinated. Sabin vaccine does occasionally induce paralytic polio^{1,2} even in very young children. This risk, however, has been estimated to be less than one per 1 000 000 vaccinated, whether by primary intent or as the result of spread to a contact. Nevertheless, paralytic poliomyelitis is occasionally noted in non-immunised relatives and household contacts of vaccinated individuals.³ Thus the current recommendation is that all non-immunised relatives and household contacts should be immunised either before or at the same time as their children. Theoretically, Sabin vaccine, like other viruses, might produce an atypical or more virulent infection in pregnancy. This is speculative, however, and there are no data to support such a contention.

Similarly, there is no evidence that polio vaccine is teratogenic. In particular, there is no firm evidence that the introduction of mass polio immunisation has altered the pattern of congenital abnormalities in the immunised population.

The practical advice, therefore, is that the non-immune mother should be immunised at the same time as any existing children before embarking on a further pregnancy. If someone who is known to be or suspected to be non-immune during pregnancy is in contact with a recently vaccinated child it is reasonable to reassure them but to recommend vaccination at the same time as the child is eventually immunised. Additional reassurance may be sought by checking antipolio antibodies; there is a high chance that the mother will prove to be immune even when there is no history of previous vaccination.—A M DENMAN, honorary consultant physician, London.

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