

Can you imagine a cancer-free population? There is such a group. According to UNESCO the Hunza tribe who live on a plateau north of Kashmir in the Himalayan mountains is the world's only cancer-free people.

The Hunza diet is minimal but rich in vitamins. They are a very clean people, and live in an environment free of industrial pollution and stress. Pioneers in the field of geocancerology, the study of cancer and geography, point out that cancer mortality is highest in countries with the greatest industrial density.

Approximately two years ago this column was devoted to the possible dangers of nuclear energy as resource. If you happen to have a file of Village Advertisers going back to April 14, 1977, you'll find Village View reported a series of near-disasters that had already occurred at nuclear plants, both in this country and abroad.

To quote a few figures from that article: In the year ending 1974, the Atomic Energy Committee found a total of over 3,000 violations in 1,288 of the 3,047 installations they inspected. In spite of the fact that 98 of the violations were considered extremely serious, in only eight instances were fines imposed.

Several readers took me to task as a scare-monger. Now I'm wondering how they feel about the situation at the Three Mile Island nuclear plant in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and if they feel as comfortable as they once did living as close as twenty miles to the nuclear plant at Plymouth.

We're told, now, it can't happen here. Before it happened, Pennsylvanians were told it couldn't happen there. Or anywhere else. But it happened.

Not only has a serious accident occurred, but every effort was made to keep it quiet. Not until after it was recognized that everyone in the neighborhood of the plant might be in serious jeopardy from radiation was any effort made to alert the public. Even then people were not adequately informed or protected. As becomes increasingly apparent, the concern is not for the public safety, but rather for the public image of nuclear power as an alternate energy resource.

VILLAGE VIEW

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As of this writing, there is fear of a melt-down which could result in a nuclear explosion. Radio reports tell us lead bricks are being hauled to the site so a shield can be built around the plant in an effort to halt the escape of low-level radiation.

What are the real dangers of low-level radiation? Opinions differ, but there are large numbers of informed scientists who advise that low-level radiation may be more dangerous to life, more apt to induce cancer, than high levels of exposure. These are not a group of rag-tag hippies; these are scientists who, until recently, received government funds to study the dangers of radiation to us, the people of the nation.

According to their findings, the reason authorities are warning that small children and pregnant women be protected from exposure to the low levels of radiation escaping from the Three Mile Island plant is that this group is most susceptible to its effects.

While humans have always lived with--and died from--natural radiation emanating from substances in the earth's crust and from cosmic rays in the atmosphere, additional man-made radiation is causing increasing incidence of cancer in living creatures. People younger than 25 and older than 45 are most susceptible to cancer from radiation, their studies reveal.

From one such study came a report that the one percent of the population who have been exposed to X-rays before birth have a 500 percent increased chance of developing leukemia.

This study was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association in May, 1977.

Or take the Millstone Point nuclear reactor study in Waterford, Connecticut. Cancer deaths increased 58.5 percent between 1970 when the plant began operating and 1975. Radioactivity levels in the air, soil, vegetation, and in milk from cows pastured near the nuclear plant reached or exceeded levels monitored during the height of nuclear weapons testing in the early 1960s.

While it may seem to be a contradiction that cancer can be cured by radiation and also caused by it, it is well-established that a high dose of radiation can kill cells, including cancer cells. Dead cells cannot reproduce; thus by exposure of localized areas of the body to high radiation doses some cancer can be eradicated.

Low-level radiation, on the other hand, may be far more dangerous. One study indicates that women with uterine cancer who received 1000 rads of radiation did not develop leukemia, but another group treated for menstrual disorders with 100 to 200 rads became leukemia victims.

The studies referred to above were made by scientists working under government grants. When published, their findings did not support government policy. As a result, our government's scientific community, including the Environmental Protection Agency, the National Cancer Institute, and the Energy Research and Development Administration dismissed the results. Grants were terminated. Research funding was taken away. Study results that had taken years to accumulate and millions of dollars to gather were buried and now lie gathering dust. Scientists whose findings contradicted government policy were fired, retired, or denied financial support for their work and their reports discredited.

We're told, now, there is no danger of radiation fall out in New England because of the radiation leak in Harrisburg. Yet in October, 1976, nine days after the People's Republic of China tested a 200-kiloton nuclear bomb, a radioactive cloud traveled high above the United States, encountered a heavy rain storm over the Appalachians, and when the rain fell on New England along with it came radioactive fallout. Radioactive rain contaminated milk in New England states and infant mortality rose an average of 17 percent in four of the states with the heaviest fallout from the nuclear test.

Maybe there's no connection?

In two affected states, pregnant mothers were provided with milk from cows placed on stored (uncontaminated) feed or with milk imported from states with no fallout. The infant mortality rate actually fell in those two states during the same period it was rising where pregnant mothers were not so protected.

This is definitely not a propitious time to do battle with the proliferation of nuclear power as an alternate energy resource. We're besieged with problems of importing expensive foreign oil, of raging inflation, and of a highly explosive situation in the Middle East.

To keep industrial wheels greased, cars on the road, our jobs, and our living standards at their present level, we need oil and we need power from oil, nuclear plants or some other source.

We also need protection from radiation-induced cancer. Propitious time or not, it's a lousy way to die. Maybe the Hunza tribe of Kashmir are more fortunate than we. It might be pleasant to live in an environment free of industrial pollution and stress. It might even be worth sacrificing the advantages of industrial development and conveniences. A hundred years ago people survived without cars and trucks, radios and televisions, refrigeration and central heating, electricity and power plants.

Mankind COULD survive without them again. It's a question today of whether we can co-exist with nuclear power plants.