

Book Reviews

Should I Be Tested for Cancer? Maybe Not, and Here's Why, by H. Gilbert Welch, M.D., M.P.H., 225 pp, hardback, \$20, ISBN 0520239768, Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 2004.

This is a truly excellent book, which I recommend to physicians, patients, health insurance company administrators, the staff of the National Institutes of Health, and malpractice attorneys, as well as medical advisers of politicians.

H. Gilbert Welch, a Dartmouth Medical School professor and co-director of the VA Outcomes Group, has written a highly understandable revelation of the folly of testing for cancer in people with no symptoms and average risk.

His book follows and expands a jarring but persuasive paper¹ – which states that the answer is “no,” mostly because of lead-time bias.

His target is not cancer tests in all people, but excessively broad screening in people with no symptoms, or in people who do not have a high genetic risk. Welch is not extreme or alarmist in tone. Quite the contrary; he's very modest and diplomatic. He makes great effort not to be misunderstood or misquoted, and makes sure all is easy to comprehend, with clear figures and tables. Referencing is to a high standard.

He explains how only a few people will benefit from common cancer tests such as the prostate-specific antigen (PSA), fecal blood, mammograms, and others. This puts Welch in complete agreement with Gerd Gigerenzer's book *Calculated Risks*.² He is enough of an insider to be able to explain the flaws in clinical trials used by authorities to recommend extensive testing – or, in some cases, the lack of trials in support of certain widely used screening tests. The large

fraction of unnecessary procedures (including biopsy, surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy) for slow-growing tumors – or even non-malignant ones – performed because of excessive testing is presented bravely as the travesty of medical care that it is. The uncertainty of testing is exposed: a “positive” for cancer may be wrong a third of the time, and it's then up to the patient to get second opinions.

Dr. Welch airs the mental torture of false positives, leading to worthless biopsies. He elaborates on the results of diverse judgments by different pathologists, and of the biopsy sampling device missing the neoplasm. He laments the fear and needless worry to which people are subjected who have non-cancer, such as ductal carcinoma-in-situ (DCIS), or a slow-growing tumor.

He mourns the cost of testing asymptomatic people under 50, as cancers in that group are rare, and the waste in testing asymptomatic people over 70, because any cancers found are likely to grow too slowly to be lethal.

He reveals the financial and legal pressures on physicians to test excessively, and includes advice for patients on talking or writing to their physicians to indicate their unwillingness to undergo too many tests – and to promise not to hold their physicians liable if a cancer is “missed.”

Welch exposes deaths caused by cancer treatment as a reason for the lack of improvement in all-cause mortality rates in cancer patients. Very few people, even physicians, know that most of the claims for the effectiveness of cancer treatment focus on the reduction in cancer deaths, not all-cause deaths. Even when a treatment can cut the deaths from a particular cancer in half, most current treatments create non-

cancer deaths, typically cardiac deaths,³ many of which will be improperly reported. The tendency in clinical trials to attribute any death of a control subject to cancer is also exposed.

Welch is especially expert on the misleading nature of five-year survival rates, which can rise because of early detection, yet with no change in the cancer-plus-cancer-treatment mortality rate—all aspects of lead-time bias. He calls five-year survival rates “the world's most misleading number,” but he concedes that they may be useful in clinical trials. He explains clearly how these rates are calculated, how age adjustments are made, and how randomization for trials is done. He reveals pitfalls in trials that are not taught in medical school and are generally known only to medical researchers.

He tries to explain the recently lowered mortality rates of some cancer types (pp 146-8), but did not consider radiation hormesis in the case of breast cancer.⁴ It would have been interesting to read his opinion of the AMAS test for cancer, which was not in the book, and which does give many false positives.⁴

Welch's main message is that more testing leads to more “positive” results, many of which are false, occasioning still more testing, which finds more early “cancers.” Waiting several months and being re-tested may be preferable to creating or succumbing to fear and pressures for early treatment in most patients.

REFERENCES

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³ Cuzick J, Stewart H, Rutqvist L, et al. Cause-specific mortality in long-term survivors of breast cancer who participated in trials of radiotherapy. *J Clin Oncol* 1994;12:447-453.

⁴ Kauffman JM, McGee CT. Are the biopositive effects of x-rays the only benefits of repetitive mammograms? *Med Hypotheses* 2004;62:674-678.

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Lives at Risk: Single-Payer National Health Insurance Around the World, by John Goodman, Gerald Musgrave, and Devon Herrick, 263 pp, softback, \$22.95, ISBN 0-7425-4152-5, Lanham, Md., Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004.

If you need to formulate sound arguments opposing single-payer national health insurance, but don't know anyone who supports the concept, you can sharpen your skills by debating with any 6-year-old child. Just like all single-payer proponents, they want everything, they want it now, and they want it to be free.

In this book, the authors, all from the National Center for Policy Analysis, provide an excellent survey of single-payer medical systems around the world, designed by the whims of 6-year-old minds, operated by helpless medical personnel who are denied the resources to provide state-of-the-art care, and endured by hapless patients who die waiting for urgent health care they "have a right to."

The heart of the book is composed of 20 chapters, each of which explodes one of the unchallenged sacred cows programmed into the heads of national health insurance advocates. Even better, each myth is exposed by the standards proclaimed, and data generated, by the various single-payer health insurance systems around the world.

Perhaps the best of these 20 chapters, especially from a physician's per-

spective, addresses the myth of "administrative costs," which are usually defined erroneously as only those costs that are not paid to hospitals and physicians: i.e. costs borne by insurers in processing claims. Every physician knows that much, or even most, of the fees they are paid are not invested in treating the patient, but needlessly wasted in complying with rules made by insurers and state and federal governments.

The authors also expose the administrative costs myth from two other dimensions. First is the myth of manufacturing vs. service. This archaic division was made to distinguish the value of manufacturing of tangible products from the production of services, such as retail sales, media information, or restaurants. Several years ago *Fortune* magazine finally conceded the fallacy of this division and ceased to segregate its Fortune 500 rankings into manufacturing and service categories.

Second is the myth that administrative or information costs always, by definition, represent waste. Yet everyone must admit that the best and worst book they have ever read cost the same amount to produce, and that the difference to the reader between the values of these two books is not represented by the cost of producing the paper, ink, artwork, and glue.

If avid proponents of single-payer national health insurance were to read this book—an unlikely prospect, given their mindset—they would be left with only two logical counter-arguments for single-payer medicine: comparative life expectancies and the achievement of utilitarian goals.

The authors dismiss the longer life expectancies in Western countries with socialized medicine by claiming that, "... life expectancy tells us almost nothing about the efficacy of health care systems...." While this may be true to some extent, the point is somewhat disingenuous and certainly debatable. On average, without knowing anything else about a country, almost everyone wants to live in a

county with an average life expectancy of 75 instead of one with an average expectancy of 55. And the odds are good that the medical systems in countries with long life expectancies are doing some things right.

While the authors condemn single-payer systems because they deny care to the elderly, one could make the case that, under a socialist, communist, or even fascist state, this could be deemed desirable because it achieves the utilitarian objective of the greatest good for the greatest number. Medical treatment or preventive measures have the most value at younger ages. Vaccinating newborns has a much higher return on investment than organ transplants to 80-year-olds.

Yet even if the authors were to concede this point, there is still no reason why single-payer systems cannot declare an Emancipation Proclamation and grant citizens their "health care freedom" after a certain age, allowing them to spend as much of their own resources on health care as they please.

At the outset, the authors do concede that Canada has relatively good free-market medical care—provided you're not a Canadian citizen. As documented in the chapter on the mythical "right to health care," foreigners, pets, and barnyard animals can purchase the services they need, such as an MRI scan, while loyal Canadians legally cannot.

A good rule of thumb in the publishing industry is that the last chapter of business books is reserved for bold projections and fantasies of the future, which seldom come true and can be easily ignored by the reader. This holds for the final two chapters of this book, which attempt to define an "ideal health care system" for the United States.

The "solution" outlined in the book appears to be a tactical political maneuver by the authors to fill the void of a single-payer system, which apparently they feel is inevitable. It reflects an inadequate understanding of the health insurance

market, and is based on the non sequitur: "... in our imaginary pool, everyone *must voluntarily* agree to the design of the plan ..." (emphasis added).

But if you're engaged in the battle against single-payer medicine, don't let this deter you from reading the 20 chapters that refute the common myths. It's the most up-to-date, well-researched, and best collection of data and arguments that you will need to have in your arsenal for debating the opposition. It will also greatly expand readers' thinking on the topic, allowing them to build more detailed and specific arguments from their own expertise and experience.

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Left Illusions: an Intellectual Odyssey, by David Horowitz, 500 pp, hardback, \$29.95, ISBN 1890626511, Dallas, Tex., Spence Publishing Company, 2003.

I will always be a child of the '60s. Like others of my generation, I came of age listening to Chet Huntley deliver the day's body counts interspersed with combat scenes from Viet Nam. I matriculated at a very liberal/radical college (the same institution that educated our own Dr. Huntoon) in time to worry over a boyfriend's draft number, to wear love beads, to watch Black Panther marches, and to witness the emerging tyranny of the new Left. Students had just been shot by National Guardsmen at Kent State University. After a sit-down strike in front of the chemistry building, a student meeting was called to discuss closing my college in protest over the shootings, the war, and for other reasons too "obvious" to need clear definition. Generally, order prevailed, and the crowd listened carefully to every word of our radical student leaders. Discussion was free and open—unless you happened to disagree with the majority. An English professor in a tweed jacket (probably a "conservative" if anyone had thought in

those terms then) tried to bring reason to the assembly by suggesting that closing the school would only cheat the students and would not bring about the social change they called for. He was booed and shouted down. A brave senior made a similar plea, but his words were drowned out before he finished his first sentence. I did not take one political science course those four years, but the lessons I learned about the new socialism, moral relativism, and "liberal" intolerance have stayed with me.

For a long time I wondered whether I was alone in my experience of those years. Fortunately, David Horowitz—former Marxist and student radical, now a conservative—has recreated his own path from the sixties to the present. His new book *Left Illusions* contains some essays from his days as a student radical, then progresses through his years of change, and focuses on today with blistering critiques of socialism, the environmental movement, and modern radicalism.

The book is a must read for anyone of my generation, and also for the youth of today. Horowitz quotes Irving Kristol in the prologue: "This is the perennial challenge: to teach our young the conditions of being human, of managing life's tasks in a world that is (and must remain) forever imperfect. The refusal to come to terms with this reality is the heart of the radical impulse and accounts for its destructiveness—and thus for much of the bloody history of our age."

His chapters cover a broad range — including "Hand Me Down Marxism," "Liberals and Race," "From Red to Green" (how the radical environmental movement is using the same paradigm as the communists of old), "Why Israel Is the Victim," and "Missing Diversity" (a frightening exposé of the takeover of our universities by leftists).

Horowitz regales us with facts throughout his book, none better than in the chapter "The Road to Nowhere"—detailing the failure of 70 years of Soviet socialism. (Soviet joke: "What is socialism? It is the longest road from capitalism to capital-

ism.") For example: in 1992, while America was developing better MRIs and PET scanning, 80 percent of Soviet hospitals had no hot water, and 50 percent had no running water at all! The average life expectancy for a Soviet male in 1992 was less than under the czar. More than 70 percent of the Soviet atmosphere was polluted with five times the permissible limit of toxic chemicals. Thirty percent of all Soviet foods contained hazardous pesticides. Even in peacetime, food was rationed. In 1992, the red meat intake was half of what it had been for a subject of the czar in 1913.

David Horowitz creates elegant arguments with beautiful English prose laced with well-researched facts. That he has had a hard time getting published by liberal presses or difficulty being allowed to speak on college campuses is no wonder—he certainly would irritate those who refuse to see the world as it is. The classic joke, "A conservative is a liberal hit in the face with reality" describes David Horowitz. His epiphany alone is worth the price of the book. This Christmas, instead of sending wine to my referring physicians, I will be sending out 40 copies of *Left Illusions*.

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Give Me a Break—How I Exposed Hucksters, Cheats, and Scam Artists, and Became the Scourge of the Liberal Media, by John Stossel, 294 pp, \$24.95, ISBN 0060529148, New York, N.Y., HarperCollins Publishers, 2004.

John Stossel, the first confrontational television consumer reporter, exposes con men and cheats. In this fascinating book, he explodes the liberal myth that government works, and shows that free markets under capitalism do a better job.

He documents his journey from cub reporter to co-anchor of the ABC news "magazine" *20-20*, during which time he

became a “traitor” to the capitalism-hating journalism community, denounced and shunned by his colleagues. At first he believed that corporations were evil, all risk was intolerable, and coercive government was necessary to protect its citizens. But after 15 years of consumer reporting, he concluded that private groups under the free market are more effective at protecting consumers.

Here, Stossel exposes a large number of disastrous government departments and programs. He documents the expense and adverse effects of the War on Poverty (the government poverty industry); the War Against Drugs; the Environmental Protection Agency’s regulations; the Americans with Disabilities Act; the Housing and Urban Development (HUD) public housing scandal; the Food and Drug Administration; National Flood Insurance; the Agriculture Department’s farm subsidies; the 1931 Davis-Bacon Act; the child labor law; and the Transportation Security Administration. He points out that the Department of Labor, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Drug Enforcement Administration, and the Consumer Product Safety Commission have caused much more harm than good. He proposes that reporters should warn us when government makes a new rule by announcing, “New OSHA Rule to Save Six, Kill Ten.”

Today, 150 government agencies with more than 5 million employees produce thousands of pages of new rules every year on the presumption that central planners can run our lives better than we can by ourselves. Thomas Sowell termed this “the conceit of the anointed.” Most of these rules actually hurt the consumers they are supposed to protect. They also deprive us of the rights guaranteed by the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution.

Most Americans don’t seem concerned about the “nanny state.” Our first reaction to any problem is to “bring the government in.” However, as Michael Kelly, editor of the *New Republic* notes, “Every time the

government tries to make life better for you, it uses force. It makes criminals out of people who are not criminals.” Also, safety and environmental regulations destroy the economic engine of capitalism. Government spending huge amounts of money for very small risks makes all of us poorer.

Poverty itself is associated with an increased risk for illness and premature death. For example, whereas driving a car reduces one’s life expectancy by 182 days, and smoking reduces it by 5.25 years, poverty reduces it by nine years, largely because the poor can’t afford the things that keep others alive.

More than a billion of the world’s poor survive on one dollar a day. Stossel compares India, a desperately poor nation, with Hong Kong, which has the most economic freedom. India has a population density similar to that of New Jersey, but Hong Kong’s is 20 times that of India, and it has no valuable natural resources. In the 1920s Hong Kong was as poor as India, but economic freedom with limited government allowed it to become rich. Hong Kong has low taxes, no Federal Trade Commission, no OSHA, and no labor or minimum wage laws.

The world’s best poverty fighter is capitalism, with its economic freedom based on property rights. Capitalism is not a zero-sum game, but it enlarges the pie for everyone. The rich get richer, it’s true, but the poor also benefit. Today 97 percent of America’s poor have color television, 75 percent own cars, and nearly half own their own homes.

One of their biggest health problems is obesity. This contrasts with the poor in China, North Korea, or Cuba today. After more than 30 years of Communist rule, Castro’s 11 million Cubans exist in dire poverty. Their average monthly salary to buy food and clothing and pay rent is \$10, compared with \$2,080 in the US. A civil engineering graduate in Cuba earns \$360 a year, while one in the US earns \$60,000.

Stossel describes our disastrous legal system, with its destructive litigation and class-action lawsuits, as a failure and a

laughingstock. It is so bad that it isn’t working even for the lawyers, who choose a profession “many won’t like, where they’re not building something, not making the economic pie bigger, just fighting over who gets which slice, making each slice cost more, and taking our freedom in the process.”

To correct these problems, Stossel suggests that we avoid using lawsuits just as we avoid using nuclear missiles. We should adopt the “loser pays” rule to address lawsuit abuse. We should stop passing new rules and regulations. We should repeal thousands of ineffective laws. We should stop the relentless growth of government and reduce it by half, from 40 percent of the economy to 20 percent.

But he misses a very important part of the solution—the education of our citizens. The world is ruled by the ideas of economists and political philosophers, whether they are right or wrong. The discipline of economics deals with the consequences of choice and identifies the universal rules of human action. Any social arrangement or plan that violates these rules will fail. That is why von Mises insisted that learning economics is our primary civic duty.

Unfortunately, the “neoclassical school” of economics taught in our schools today misrepresents human nature and uses unrealistic artificial models that ignore the subjective nature of value. That, plus the egalitarian idea that government bureaucrats can make choices for all citizens, leads to the many expensive and harmful government programs exposed in *Give Me A Break*.

As F.A. Hayek noted, “Order generated without design can far outstrip plans men consciously contrive.” America is not run by politicians or by bureaucrats, but by millions of free people pursuing their own ends, who make millions of choices every day. Free minds and free markets will create the system that benefits everyone the most, but this can happen only when an informed public demands smaller government.

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