

The Feminine Critique

"Cancer by the bay

BY JEAN TEPPERMAN

JUST SECONDS AFTER I read the headline — "Bay Has Highest Breast Cancer Rate" — I was already playing risk-factor roulette, searching the story for reasons that didn't apply to me. One expert said it might be affluence: Women in the Bay Area can afford more foods that contain toxins. Aha! Meat! I get a point for being a vegetarian. More points for being nonobese (by medical if not fashion standards) and not drinking alcohol (it's not virtue, it's migraines). Delaying birth? I guess having my first baby at 32 is borderline — well, half a point.

Then there were the reassurances by Dr. Robert Hiatt, director of prevention science at the Northern California Cancer Center, quoted in the *Citizen* a few days later. Probably, Hiatt said, the higher rate of cancer is because of better detection: Bay Area women are so smart we get our mammograms.

"It's not that there is something horrible about ... the San Francisco Bay Area, that we're polluted or whatever," Hiatt said. Whew!

The trouble was, I didn't believe it.

So I called Nancy Evans, the knowledgeable and beautifully blunt director of Breast Cancer Action, for some perspective. Like many activists in the movement of women with breast cancer, Evans suspects that cancer rates are rising precisely because "we're polluted or whatever." She reminded me that all the known risk factors together explain less than a quarter of breast-cancer cases. She quickly followed, though, with the classic fighter's advice: "This is not a time to panic," she said. "This is a time to get political."

Identifying and fighting poisons in the environment, Evans said, "is really where the action is going to take place in the next five years. This issue is bigger than breast cancer, bigger than cancer. It's about all our health."

The bad news — that cancer-causing chemicals and radiation are swirling around in our air and water — most of us already knew. The good news is that women's health organizations, environmentalists, and the movement against environmental racism are pulling together into a new national coalition to challenge industrial polluters.

Gathering forces

Last February Greenpeace hosted a conference in Austin, Texas, where 21 organizations including Breast Cancer Action, Bella Abzug's international Women's Environmental and Development Organization, United Farm Workers, Richmond's West County Toxics Coalition, Clean Water Action, and others launched a campaign with the slogan "Cancer and the Environment: Action for Prevention." Participants have already held follow-up regional meetings in Ohio, New Mexico, and Massachusetts; Evans is hoping to hold one here in 1995.

Meanwhile Bay Area groups have formed a Toxic Links Coalition, whose first public action was an Oct. 26 "cancer industry tour" of downtown San Francisco, during which they visited the headquarters of Chevron, Bechtel, and others with signs that read, "Stop cancer where it starts."

"When people see Breast Cancer Action, West County Toxics, and Clean Water Action together," Evans said, "the light goes on: Where we live is making us sick." BCA and its allies are pushing the "cancer establishment" to concentrate less on treatment and more on research into the causes of cancer, including environmental causes. Sharon Batt, in her new book, *Patient No More: The Politics of Breast Cancer*, and other activists charge that drug companies, research organizations, and hospitals have a financial stake in keeping the focus on treatment rather than prevention.

Tougher than tofu

But of course the big reason people avoid thinking about environmental factors is that changing them means taking on powerful corporate polluters — a lot harder than getting mammograms and eating your broccoli. It also means taking on the medical establishment itself, according to a soon-to-be-published book by a prominent Bay Area scientist.

Dr. John Goffman, a professor emeritus at both UC Berkeley and UCSF, has spent decades studying the link between cancer and radiation. His book will show, he told me, that radiation, mainly medical radiation, is responsible for three-quarters of today's breast cancer. (In response to my anxious question, he said his findings don't mean women should stop having mammograms. The dose involved, he said, is "chicken feed.")

Wait a minute, I asked BCA's Evans, if radiation caused all this cancer, what about the toxic chemicals? She explained that cancer has two levels of causes: "initiators," like radiation, and "promoters," like many organochlorides and estrogen. They're all coming at us.

Again, though, you probably already knew the bad news — that turning our sweet toxic home back into a healthy environment means challenging powerful polluters. The good news is the creation of this new coalition, bringing together dedicated, for-real grassroots activists from very different communities: mostly white, middle-class breast-cancer activists, people of color fighting poison in their communities, and some of the biggest, hardest-working environmental organizations.

If the Age of the Republicans makes you feel like fighting back, here's your chance: contact Breast Cancer Action at (415) 922-8279; Greenpeace at (415) 512-9025; West County Toxics Coalition at (510) 232-3427; or Clean Water Action at (415) 362-3040. ■

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Cancer and environment

Kudos to Jane Kay and John Flinn for their excellent article ("Bay has highest breast cancer rate," Metro section, Dec. 4), which focused on the fact that "Bay Area white women have the highest rate of breast cancer in the world." This must force us to examine additional scientific information and push the health and science establishment to truly investigate the links between our degrading environment and cancer.

Consider that as early as 1964, the World Health Organization concluded that 80 percent of cancers were due to human-produced carcinogens. In 1979, the National Institutes of Health identified environmental factors as the major cause of most cancers. The incidence of breast cancer continues to rise, and one in eight American women will be diagnosed with the disease.

Women are angry and have organized. Their voices are being heard in Washington and throughout the states as they speak out in strong coalitions. This year, with help from President Clinton, the appropriations for breast cancer research at the National Cancer Institute reached an all-time high of \$350 million. Yet, only a minute amount will be spent on research involving environmental causes of breast cancer. Why?

The answer must come from the American Cancer Society and National Cancer Institute. Are these established organizations so linked to medical and pharmaceutical corporations that they fear to tread where the arrow points?

Robert Hiatt, at the Northern California Cancer Center, was quoted as considering three reasons for the Bay Area increase: improved diagnosing and reporting, increased risk factors and the exposure to environmental factors. If a higher diagnosis rate

were a factor, every urban area in the country would show these increases. Risk factors are getting attention, research and funding.

Perhaps it is time for the American Cancer Society and the National Cancer Institute to direct their voices, dollars and scientists to investigating the proven links between environmental factors and cancer.

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