

knocked from power over the issue of nuclear plants and their attendant wastes. In 1976 the Social Democratic Party was voted out of office, primarily because of its pronuclear stance. The Center Party, which assumed power, had campaigned on the promise that it would kill nuclear power. In June of last year it passed a Nuclear Power Stipulation Bill, which basically said that unless a nuclear-power-plant operator has a contract stating how and where radioactive wastes will ultimately and permanently be stored, the plant cannot be licensed to operate.

Peter Steen, an energy specialist in Sweden's prestigious Secretariat for Future Studies, said at the time that the law would probably have little effect because Sweden has so few energy options (it lacks fossil fuels, relying on imported oil for 70 percent of its energy). The final toll was reckoned a few weeks ago when Center Party Prime Minister Thorbjorn Falldin resigned over conflicts about what to do with nuclear power. □

## Doctors' strike lowered death rate

While the American College of Surgeons was meeting last week in San Francisco, a University of California at Los Angeles researcher was telling an American Public Health Association conference in Los Angeles that a strike by doctors in 1976 significantly lowered the death rate in Los Angeles. Milton I. Roemer said the cause of the decrease was clearly a drop in the number of unnecessary operations performed during that time.

Roemer and his colleague Jerome L. Schwartz compared the death rate in Los Angeles during the five weeks of the strike to that of the same period of time in preceding years. During the five weeks in question, the weekly death rate averaged 19.8 deaths per 100,000 population from 1971 to 1975, but suddenly fell to 16.2 during the strike. After the strike, the rate jumped back to an average of 20.4 deaths per week over the next five weeks.

As a check of their assumption that the decrease was due to a decline of elective surgery, the two public health researchers also examined infant mortality for the same periods, since few young children experience elective surgery. They found no significant change in the number of infant deaths.

When the president of the Los Angeles County Medical Association, Richard F. Corlin, was asked to comment on the report, he replied that although there had been a clear drop in mortality, it would be unfair to "lay it all on elective surgery." Some necessary surgery had also been postponed during the relatively short strike, he said, which merely postponed a risk already facing the patients concerned. □

## The sobering cost of alcoholism

Drug statistics are similar in one respect to those of war, natural disasters and others involving death and injury: The reality of human lives lost and of suffering is buried somewhere in the massive figures. Nevertheless, the very proportions of numbers in the latest Health, Education and Welfare department report on alcoholism in the United States are noteworthy:

- An estimated 10 million adults are either alcoholics or problem drinkers.
- As many as 205,000 deaths a year are alcohol-related.
- More than 3 million—19 percent—of the 14- to 17-year-olds in the United States are considered problem drinkers.

Despite this picture, the statistics do indicate somewhat of a leveling off of alcohol consumption and certain accompanying problems. Per capita consumption remains at more than two-and-one-half gallons of absolute ethanol per person (14 years and older), but has not changed appreciably since 1970. Following a sharp increase in cirrhosis deaths during the 1960s, the death rate from liver cirrhosis actually dropped by 6.3 percent in 1975 (the latest year from which data for the study were taken). Still, cirrhosis ranks as the sixth most common cause of death in the United States, with up to 95 percent of the cases estimated to be alcohol-related.

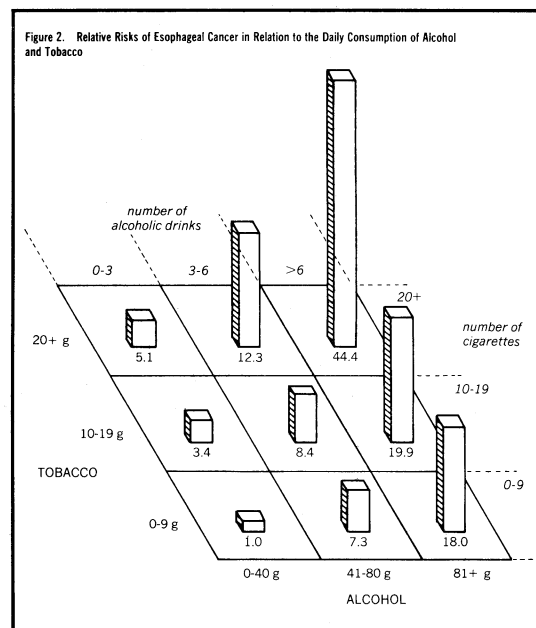
Overall, the report suggests that alcohol abuse is far from under control. "This report documents the reality that problem drinking is threatening or damaging or destroying the lives of literally tens of millions of Americans," says HEW Secretary Joseph A. Califano Jr. In addition to contributing to liver and heart disease, "indisputably, alcohol is one cause of cancer," according to the report. However, that conclusion is based on rates-of-incidence studies, and experts note that no direct cause-effect relationship between alcohol and cancer has been established.

Drinking "exposes the drinker to an increase in the risk of cancer at various sites in the body," the report states. It cites several studies indicating that drinkers run a higher risk than nondrinkers of developing cancer of the tongue, mouth, esophagus, larynx, oropharynx, hypopharynx and liver. And persons who both smoke and drink run a considerably higher risk of head and neck cancers. One French study reports that heavy smokers and drinkers have a 44.4 percent higher chance of developing esophageal cancer than do abstainers. The risk for heavy users of alcohol only is 18 times higher, and, for heavy tobacco users only, 5 times higher.

Spokesmen for the liquor industry dispute the "sweeping" conclusion that alcohol and cancer are linked. They point to a comment made earlier this year by National Cancer Institute Director Arthur C.

Upton, who stated before a U.S. Senate committee that "alcohol ingested by itself does not appear to be carcinogenic." Nevertheless, the correlations in previous studies are enough to prompt cancer and alcohol experts to discuss the phenomenon jointly this week at the National Institutes of Health.

The HEW report estimates that drinking problems cost society about \$43 billion a year in lost production, medical costs and other expenses. About half the traffic fatalities, half the homicides and one-third of the suicides are associated with alcohol misuse, according to the report, which adds that alcohol is also the third leading cause of birth defects associated with mental retardation.



Data from a study in France indicate that the risk of esophageal cancer jumps significantly as the daily rate of alcohol and tobacco consumption increases.

The figures suggest that from 1.5 to 2.25 million women have alcohol problems, but are still considerably less likely than men to develop such problems. Among the elderly, only 2 percent of the women are problem drinkers, but up to 10 percent of the men have such problems; approximately 10 percent of alcoholics in treatment are 60 or older.

"Among all special population groups in the United States, American Indians have the highest reported frequency of problems associated with drinking," the report says. Problem drinking also tends to occur more often among Spanish-speaking people, according to HEW. Drinking rates for white males and females are slightly higher than those for blacks.

"Excessive consumption of alcohol takes a terrible toll on the health, safety and happiness of millions of Americans," says Califano. "We know beyond a reasonable doubt that the misuse of alcohol is an immense health and social problem." □