

Americans on health—good intentions

Much like the recently discovered, puzzling object in space — characterized by one astounded scientist as a celestial “double-ended, rotating garden hose” (SN: 4/28/79, p. 277) — the American public frequently represents an enigmatic blur of conflicting ideas and actions. The confusion emanating from this terrestrial body politic is clearly visible (with the naked eye) in the results of a national study on the attitudes and practices of Americans regarding health and mental health.

“There is a rather strange pattern emerging in the way the American family thinks and acts about health. It seems as if there is more commitment to looking and feeling terrific *right now* than there is to avoidance of dread disease in the future — even if some of the preventive measures are simple and inexpensive,” says Florence Skelly, executive vice president of Yankelovich, Skelly and White, which conducted the survey of 1,254 families (2,181 individuals) for General Mills, Inc.

The 192-page report, unveiled at a Washington, D.C., press conference last week, says that “despite high interest and concern about personal well-being, few Americans regularly practice good health habits.” While many families place a high value on health and well-being, few actually attempt to achieve such goals by engaging in exercise and preventive health measures, such as checkups.

“Despite the recent attention given to physical fitness participants — joggers, tennis players and others — nearly two out of three adult family members exercise only occasionally and, even among these, frequency is declining,” states the report. Many adults would rather unwind by watching television or going out to a bar, restaurant or movie. Most say that if they feel healthy at the moment, they assume they have no physical problems.

One of every two families reports it has cut back on preventive health care — including annual physical exams, quality of daily diet, dental work and new glasses — primarily because of inflation and rising costs. As might be expected, low income and minority-member families have cut back more than most. But approximately three out of four members of all families feel that medical checkups currently cost too much for the average family to afford.

The “most discouraging,” as well as puzzling, finding, says surveyor Deborah Barron, involves mental health. While a majority of Americans see mental illness as a health problem, their attitudes toward specific symptoms — including depression, nervousness, alcoholism, and child abuse — are that they represent “emotional weaknesses” on the part of the individual. Most respondents said they would try to solve such problems, even chronic depression, themselves, before seeking the help of a psychiatrist or psychologist.

This appears to be a consequence of two factors: The public (77 percent) believes there is still a stigma attached to mental illness and thinks that employers or others may discriminate against persons with problems, and most people do not fully trust mental health professionals. Of those surveyed, just 15 percent expressed a high level of confidence in psychiatrists, who ranked lower on this question than pharmacists and television programs. In contrast, 75 percent expressed confidence in medical doctors in general.

In another series of enigmatic responses, those surveyed supported a national health bill, although, Barron admits, “most people did not know what we were talking about regarding a national health bill ... most thought it was socialized medicine.” Paradoxically, the majority also felt that the bulk of government

health funds should not go to health care, but to researching cures and preventions for ailments such as cancer, which ranked first on the public's list of health fears.

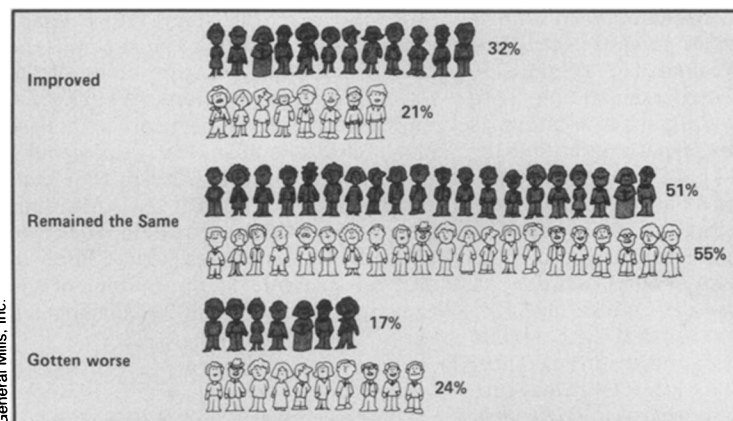
Other findings in the study include:

- More than four of every five families feel there is too much stress in their daily lives; and many are finding it harder to cope with everyday living than they did a few years ago.

- Industrial waste, pollution and cigarettes ranked higher on the health threats list than nuclear power — but the survey was taken before the Three Mile Island incident.

- Given the un hoped-for choice, most parents would prefer to see their child smoke marijuana than drink alcoholic beverages.

- Despite confusion over government warnings, nearly 80 percent of those surveyed want the government to assure product and substance safety, even if it means warning people when evidence is inconclusive. □



Assessing recent changes in medical care quality: Dark figures represent all adults; light are low income persons.

Old bones: Exposing today's lead hazards

Americans and other industrial-nation dwellers may be exposed to considerably higher lead levels than previously expected, according to an archaeological study reported in the April 26 NEW ENGLAND JOURNAL OF MEDICINE. An American and Japanese research team estimates that present-day residents of the United States and Great Britain have 500 times the lead contamination levels they would have had in a “natural” environment prior to the development of lead mining. On the basis of their results, the scientists advocate a reexamination of currently acceptable lead standards.

The archaeologists analyzed the 1,600-year-old bone and tooth remains of Peruvians buried in the Viru Valley and “isolated from early sources of lead pollution,” which began with lead mining in the Northern Hemisphere 4,500 years ago. Employing “ultra-clean” laboratory techniques, which they say improve upon previous attempts to eliminate lead contamination added during collection and transport, the scientists analyzed the lead

content of the Peruvian bones. The “true” lead content present 1,600 years ago — with that part of the world in a “natural” environmental state — was obtained through a complex process comparing the ratio of lead to calcium with the ratio of barium to calcium.

The lead/calcium ratio — the key indicator of lead contamination — is 500 times lower in the ancient bones than in those recently measured in contemporary Americans and British, report Harvard anthropologist Jonathon E. Ericson, Caltech geochemist Clair C. Patterson and Hiroshi Shirahata of the Muroran Institute of Technology in Japan. “Based on what we already know about lead poisoning and its effect on neurological functions [SN: 4/7/79, p. 230], it is extremely important for us to reevaluate now the critical levels of lead permissible in our society,” says Ericson. The findings strongly suggest, he says, that the high, contemporary lead levels “must result from overexposure of present-day people to industrial lead and not from natural variations.” □