

IX - The Professional Debate

As a Committee, we have become increasingly dismayed at the polarized and adversarial positions being taken in the United States on the issue of environmental hypersensitivity. Our unease has been increased by the realization that there is evidence, although fortunately not yet extensive, that the same hardening of attitudes is taking place in Ontario, often fueled by media reports that highlight the extreme positions referred to elsewhere in this chapter. The toll, emotional and financial, on those involved in disputes in the United States was apparent to us; increasingly the conflict seems to be moving into the courtroom.

We believe that confidence in the health system is eroded when productive dialogue between different medical specialties disappears or is replaced by acrimonious debate before a confused public. Protagonists take up positions that are clearly untenable: eg., "all medical treatments are based upon sound scientific research"; "the environment plays little role in the generation of disease"; "all the identified patients are emotionally ill". Research that is clearly unsound methodologically is given greater weight than it deserves. There is a tendency to assert the validity of one's position on the basis of the quantity, not the quality, of the clinical trials that have been undertaken. Success is measured in the name of the latest clinician or researcher to cross from one side to the other.

The committee feels strongly that taking an absolute stance in this field is not only risky scientifically, given that there is a great deal we do not know about our environment and its effects on us, but it is also unproductive and divisive, antithetical to the task of promoting collaborative efforts that will help in understanding and treating the problem of a growing number of patients.

We emphasize again the need to develop approaches that bring together all practitioners, however their perspectives differ, and to do so before the gulf between them becomes as great as it now appears to be in the United States.

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pp266, 267.