

## Commentary

# We Are Too Safe for Our Own Good

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Risks are ubiquitous in everyday life, and we are constantly forced to make decisions about them. Whether to eat street food in Tijuana, for example, or whether to choose to drive a motorcycle or a giant SUV.

We don't make those decisions alone: Society imposes sometimes-controversial regimens to mitigate risks. Underlying the controversies about various products or activities ranging from nuclear power to gene-spliced foods is a fundamental question: How should regulators, acting as society's surrogate, approach risk in the absence of complete certainty about the likelihood of potential harm?

Proponents of a more risk-averse approach have advocated a so-called precautionary principle, which might be stated as: For fear that something harmful may possibly arise, do nothing.

Use of this precautionary principle is sometimes represented as "erring on the side of safety." A corollary is that a little "over-regulation is harmless," but that assumption is false and dangerous.

The way the precautionary principle is typically applied to research and development and to commercial products can actually increase risk. Radical environmental groups brandishing the precau-

tionary principle have prevailed upon governments in recent decades to assail and intimidate the chemical industry and, more recently, the food industry.

Potential risks should be considered before proceeding with any new activity or product. But the precautionary principle focuses solely on the possibility that tech-

An example is the environmental movement's misguided crusade to rid society of all chlorinated compounds. By the late 1980s, environmental activists were attempting to convince water authorities around the world of the possibility that carcinogenic by-products from chlorination of drinking water posed a potential

business and anti-technology than they are pro-safety.

Many groups do not stop at demanding illogical and stultifying regulation or outright bans on product testing; they advocate and carry out vandalism of the very field trials intended to answer questions about environmental safety. Such arrogance illustrates that the metastasis of the precautionary principle generally, combined with relentless opposition to innovative new products, stems from a social vision that poses serious challenges to academic, commercial and individual freedom.

Application of the precautionary principle frequently results in unscientific and discriminatory policies that inflate the costs of research, inhibit the development of new products, divert and waste resources, and restrict consumer choice. Its encroachment into additional areas of domestic and international health and safety standards will create a kind of "open sesame" that government officials could invoke fearlessly whenever they wished arbitrarily to introduce new barriers to trade or simply to yield disingenuously to the demands of a radical, anti-technology constituency.

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nologies might pose unique, extreme or unmanageable risks, even after considerable testing already has been conducted. What is missing is an acknowledgment that, even when technologies introduce new risks, most confer net benefits. That is, their use reduces many other, far more serious hazards. Examples include blood transfusions, MRI scans and automobile air bags, all of which offer immense benefits and only minimal risk.

The danger in the precautionary principle is that it distracts consumers and policymakers from known, significant threats to human health and diverts limited public health resources from those genuine and far greater risks.

cancer risk. Peruvian officials, caught in a budget crisis, used this supposed threat to public health as a justification to stop chlorinating much of their country's drinking water. That decision contributed to the acceleration and spread of Latin America's 1991-1996 cholera epidemic, which afflicted more than 1.3 million people and killed at least 11,000.

Applying the precautionary principle to biotechnology is a high priority for the anti-technology activists who plan to protest during June 24-27 BIO 2001 conference in San Diego, but as is the case for chlorine, the real issue is not safety at all. Most proponents of precautionary regulation are more anti-

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