

Letters to the Editor

Civilian Protection Measures Against Terrorist Attack Are the Best Preventive Medicine

I valued the editorial “Bioterrorism Initiatives: Public Health in Reverse” in the November issue¹ until I came to the authors’ seventh paragraph, where they began their opposition to measures to protect citizens from terrorist attacks. Their assertions that “bioterrorist initiative programs could lead to a biological and chemical arms race” and “health professionals recognized that fostering the delusion that nuclear war was survivable increased the chances for such warfare to occur” are akin to the assertion that having fire detectors and fire departments will make us kill more people than we save by encouraging carelessness.

I am almost frozen with frustration at the continued propagation, for decades, of media ridicule aimed against civil defense protection measures. These erroneous assertions about protection measures continue to influence well-meaning health professionals in ways that must give joy to the enemies who would relish the chance to totally destroy all of us. I worry every day about the dangers to my grandchildren, and the grandchildren of all others, of attacks encouraged by propagators of hatred and murder; these dangers should be taken seriously after the World Trade Center bombing and other recent events. Our civil defense protection measures have now been decimated by our misinformed public and their political leaders. Only the lives of overseas members of the armed services, or government officials, now seem precious and worth protection.

As a scientist for over 50 years who witnessed the destruction caused by nuclear weapons and who worked in early civil defense efforts to establish shelter programs and others that could save millions of lives, I am perhaps guilty for not writing more and earlier on this

topic. Apparently, many educated health professionals are not aware of the rates of decrease of fallout radioactivity (the radiation intensity increases to one tenth as much for each seven times the time since detonation; i.e., if it is 1000 R/hour at 1 hour, it would be 100 R/hour at 7 hours and 10 R/hour at $7 \times 7 = 49$ hours [about 2 days]). Nor are they aware of measures that could make strong, tight shelters, effective protection to save millions of lives from the terrible effects—yes, even the long-term effects—of chemical, biological, or radiological agents.

None of the knowledgeable and dedicated scientists and public health professionals who developed and advocated the early civil defense programs ever believed that protection of innocent civilians would make the devastation of nuclear or other massive attack desirable or acceptable. No sane person with the most elementary knowledge of the effects of weapons of mass destruction would today believe that protecting civilians to some degree would promote an arms race (even though some current dictators are trying to sell us that idea). Also, opposition to missiles aimed at missiles, and to other civilian protection measures, is ironic when we have spent and continue to spend hundreds of billions on weapons of death and destruction.

I hope I can make amends by better efforts at education in my retirement years. □

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Reference

1. Cohen HW, Gould RM, Sidel VW. Bioterrorism initiatives: public health in reverse? *Am J Public Health.* 1999;89:1629–1631.

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