

On My Mind
10/13/06

It's Friday, the 13th, but since I'm not superstitious, I won't mention it.....

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Did you know that cancer is the second leading cause of death in the CNMI? (The leading cause: cardio-vascular disease.) That fully one-third of those deaths are related to tobacco use? That treatment of cancer in the CNMI averages \$40,000 to \$150,000 per patient, and that 25% of that is spent in off-island treatment? And that the use of tobacco by CNMI teenagers is not only double that of the mainland, but the second-highest in the world?

Did you know that the biggest risk factor that leads to cancer is a person's life-style? Another is the environment - things like radiation, asbestos, 2nd hand smoke. A third factor, heredity, is responsible for only 3% of total cancer occurrences.

Statistics have shown that it is not the amount of money spent on health care per se that determines people's survival rate. People in Japan, for example, which spends half of what the U.S. does on health care, live as long as people in the U.S., and people in Cuba, which spends very little on health care, also have long life spans. The difference is in their life-styles.

These facts - and much more information - were presented to a small audience at the American Memorial Park Theater earlier this week by Dr. Neal Palafox, Chairman of the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the John A. Burns School of Medicine in Hawaii. Palafox spoke in support of a regional effort to develop a comprehensive cancer control plan.

Between \$150,000 and \$300,000 could become available from the U.S. Center for Disease Control to assist the CNMI in controlling cancer, but it requires support and involvement by all sectors of the community: the schools, the churches, the businesses, both public and private health agencies, the legislature, and the administration.

Dr. Palafox said that typically the CNMI has focussed on treating cancer after it has appeared. But if, instead, the CNMI focussed on promoting life-style changes, enormous savings could be realized. Specifically, if death due to tobacco use was eradicated - by early screening, by education, by life-style changes - 1/3 of all the money presently spent on cancer treatment would be available to meet other medical needs.

While Dr. Palafox did not present any statistics on the occurrence of cervical cancer in the CNMI, here again is an area where life-style changes could significantly decrease the number of cases of cancer. Cervical cancer is caused by transmission of a virus during intercourse; its spread could be controlled and avoided not only by the use of condoms, but also by less careless and indiscriminate sexual activity.

Other life-style factors, such as high fat diets, excess consumption of alcohol and lack of physical activity - all of which lead to obesity - can also be controlled, and further reduce the occurrence of cancer in the CNMI. Moreover, early screening can catch cancer before it spreads, and significantly reduce the high costs involved in treating full-blown cancer.

However, to bring about the changes in life-style requires education, encouragement and the availability of information about sexually transmitted disease prevention strategies, about

alternate foods, cooking preparations, activities, etc. - much of it previously provided in large part through the Commonwealth Health Center's Public Health department. However, funds for the breast and cervical cancer screening and prevention program - once offered by CHC - were re-programmed by the former administration, and have not yet been reinstated, thus making that program - those preventive measures - unavailable to the community.

Not only are such decisions harmful per se, they are also harmful in that they are "penny-wise and pound-foolish"- they may save pennies today, but they are guaranteed to incur far higher costs in the future. Moreover, in the absence of any sense of commitment and support from the administration, the legislature, or the community, the chances for CNMI involvement in a CDC-funded program of cancer control (which includes such things as education, awareness programs, and establishment of a cancer registry) may well fail altogether.

Further information about the CDC program is available from Commonwealth Cancer Association representatives Dr. Jack Hardy at 322-7753 or via e-mail to <jhardy@pticom.com>, or Dr. Robin Shearer at 236-8308.

On a brighter note, the phenomenon of the Beautify CNMI! group continues to impress and amaze. It's like a spontaneous combustion - starting as an expression of concern among a handful of people, building up into an explosion - that continues to emit bright, powerful, far-reaching, light. Here's a group made up of individuals, non-profits, government agencies, private companies, schools, churches, organizations, with no structure, no formal organization, no official status, and it has managed to accomplish what no one else, no other organization, has ever achieved in the history of the CNMI.

It is planting hundreds of trees all over the island, regularly re-claiming tons of debris in an on-going beach and island clean-up campaign, conducting an on-going island-wide re-cycling campaigns targetting schools, homes and government offices, organizing an eyesore photo drive, finally putting teeth into the anti-litter law by training litter control officers and mounting a zero-litter-tolerance campaign; it has found a way to get rid of junk cars, developed an adopt-a-beach/adopt-a-road program, received funds to paint over island graffiti, put up a web page, carried on an extensive publicity campaign - and the list goes on and on.

The busy Beautify CNMI! Group, in addition to continuing its on-going projects, for the month of October is launching its adopt-a-beach/adopt-a-road campaign and its 10/20 clean-up project next week-end, will launch its zero-litter tolerance program, tree propagation and re-cycling day in November, conduct a Beautify CNMI! Business award program and join in a Garapan Paseo Christmas tree decoration project in December, focus on coral reefs (more fish, less pollution) in January, on less graffiti in February, and in April, celebrate its one-year anniversary with an awards banquet.

Much of the credit for this remarkable achievement goes to founding spirits Congress-woman Cinta M. Kaipat, Tina Sablan of DEQ, Herminia Fusco, zoning board member, and the group's computer whiz, Angelo Villagomez of the Marianas Resource Conservation and Development Council. The active participation and support of Congressman Absalon S. Waki should also be noted. But that credit must be shared with the many others - far too numerous to mention here - who so generously give of their time and energy on a continuing basis to keep this movement alive - not only the planners and organizers but also those who scour the beaches and clean up tourist sites and dig the holes for the trees and perform all the other messy tasks that

are involved. The entire community owes them all an enormous vote of thanks, appreciation, and support!

Short takes:

Whether it was the editor, the photographer, the caption writer or someone else who was responsible, the story accompanying the picture in the papers this past week of the tipped garbage cans as proof of people littering did no one any good. It seemed pretty obvious that the cans were tipped and the mess made by dogs. Talk about missing the target!

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I hope Acting Governor Tim Villagomez will think twice, and then some more, and decide NOT to sign the Public Utility Commission bill before him. It is the wrong bill, and sends the wrong message. Yes, we need a PUC bill before the CUC RFP can be issued, but let's not start the whole process off on the wrong foot! It's much too important an issue to treat so unthinkingly.

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What is eco-tourism? True eco-tourism involves tourists in the processes of supporting environmental protection and enhancement by offering tourists an educational experience while also bringing benefit to the local community. One example: including tourists in the planting of trees. Other examples: including tourists on bird counts or in tagging turtles or in conducting marine surveys. With some stretching one could argue that, done properly, even allowing tourists to shoot feral animals on Aguigan might be considered eco-tourism.....

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Those who claim the CNMI needs funding for the purpose of providing safe drinking water are, I would submit, not being very realistic. The CNMI has never had potable drinking water, so it's not as though people are being deprived of something that's been a normal part of their lives. Nor do the tourists suffer - the hotels provide them with drinking water through their private reverse osmosis systems. For the rest of us, there are many other more immediate, more pressing, needs - like 24-hour water, or 24-hour reliable power. Only after those more basic needs have been fully taken care of should anyone start worrying about where to get the millions of dollars that will be involved in making our water drinkable.

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Shame on Paul Trombetta, Dr. Borja, Ambrose Bennet for being so homophobic, and turning innocent child's play into something supposedly devious and undesirable. A picture of Dandan students celebrating "transgender day," which appeared in this past Tuesday's *Variety*, brought forth not only an accusation from Trombetta but acknowledgments from the two school officials that it should not have happened. I liked Student Council President Jianna Marie Ramon's responding letter to the editor in Thursday's *Variety*, which said, in part, "we don't even know what that [deviant sexual behaviour] is. We are just having fun. We're sorry if you are offended."

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By way of contrast, when is Sportica Footwear going to stop running its obnoxious ad depicting a woman kneeling a man in the groin? Now that does offend me.

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Movies this week: FOUR new ones: 3 PG 13's, 1 R. Left over: 1 R, 1 PG-13, 1 PG. To

put it another way: 2 thrillers (both PG 13), 3 action films (all PG 13), 2 insipid comedies (1 PG, 1 R), and one crime drama).

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