

Medicine by John Grauerholz, M.D.

Wiping out the Pap smear

Another harbinger of the Bush depression is the limiting of access to this cancer-fighting diagnostic technique.

The Bush administration is moving to restrict access to one of the most efficient and effective tools for the early detection of cancer, the so-called Pap smear. Following the usual media barrage of scare stories, the Health Care Financing Administration (HCFA) promulgated a series of regulations designed to cure the problem of inaccurate test results.

Like most Bush-league policies, the regulations will simply destroy a capability already suffering the effects of the ongoing economic collapse. The regulations were originally published for comment on Aug. 15, 1988, and a final version was released on March 14, 1990.

An article in the April 1990 issue of *CAP Today*, the magazine of the College of American Pathologists, read:

"Although the regulations published in the *Federal Register* are 'final,' the Health Care Financing Administration has allowed an additional 60-day comment period.

"Pathologists are among those commenting most strongly. They say that the rules' requirements are so unwieldy, expensive, and burdensome that many laboratories—especially small labs and those in rural areas—can be expected to simply stop providing cytology screening altogether.

"A lot of laboratories in this country will stop doing cytology," said William B. Hamlin, M.D., Seattle pathologist and chairman of the CAP Council on Scientific Affairs, "because there's no way they can meet the requirements, as they stand today, in a reasonable fashion.

"I think the impact of this regula-

tion on the average laboratory will—at an absolute minimum—double, probably triple, and may even quadruple the cost of a Pap smear to the patient.

"The cytology proficiency testing mandate, accompanied by penalty procedures, personnel standards, workload limitations, test reporting requirements, and other provisions, is contained in the final rule published by HCFA last month.

"According to the American Cancer Society, over the past three decades, the Pap smear has contributed significantly to the sharp reduction in deaths attributable to carcinoma of the cervix. The cervical cancer death rate has, in fact, dropped some 70% since the Pap smear came into widespread use.

"The Pap smear is one of the best screening tools available for any cancer: It's inexpensive, a relatively simple sample to collect, and an effective indicator of early abnormality. American women have responded well to the call to make regular Pap smears a part of their health care programs. However, overregulation now may pose a threat to this cancer screening tool.

"Alfred Ercolano, director of the CAP Washington office, poses a possible scenario. 'In a 100-bed hospital in small-town Arkansas doing 50 pap smears a week for physicians in the community, the administration may look at these regulations and determine that they can no longer offer Pap smear screening because of the onerous paperwork requirements,' he says.

"The physicians who use that service will then have to send slides to a

lab that may be 50 to 200 miles away," Ercolano adds. "Costs will go up as will reporting turnaround times, and local physicians won't be able to communicate as well with the pathologist and cytotechnologist who has reviewed the slides."

The impetus for these regulations was provided by a series of newspaper, magazine, and televised reports beginning in late 1987. These portrayed women who were supposedly dying of cervical cancer because of misread Pap smears. This campaign initially focused on so-called "Pap mills," where overworked and under-trained technicians screened large numbers of slides.

The campaign then expanded to more generalized attacks on all medical laboratory testing. Strangely enough, this coincided with the implementation of massive cuts in the Medicare and Medicaid budgets, especially in reimbursement for laboratory services. It was also part of a move to divert mounting pressure for widespread testing for human immunodeficiency virus (HIV-AIDS) infection.

The success of this media operation can be measured by the continuing spread of HIV infection, especially among the nation's poor. With the new HCFA regulations, another weapon against disease will be restricted and more women can look forward to the gothic horror of dying of cancer of the cervix.

Dr. Lloyd Wagner, M.D., president of the American College of Pathologists, summed up the situation as follows:

"The Pap smear is effective, and it's within the reach financially of most women; if it goes up in cost and fewer people provide it, this valuable service is going to be denied to the American public—and that is an injustice."