15th Annual Albert Lasker Medical Journalism Awards Luncheon

Mike Mansfield 1903-2001

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In the years during which I have been in the Senate, cancer has claimed the lives of many outstanding colleagues. With ruthless impartiality it struck down Robert Taft, Arthur Vandenberg, Brien McMahon, Matthew Nealy, Kenneth Wherry and Richard Neuberger. During the same period heart disease took a similar, cruel toll of my friends and associates.

These deaths have been an intimate reminder that the struggle against needless mortality, against premature death is a continuing one. The struggle is not only the scientist’s concern or the doctor’s calling. It is a national responsibility.

Each year disease kills 1,700,000 Americans. A survey conducted by the Health Information Foundation documented the fact that the American economy suffered the loss of more than $13 billion in wages and salaries during the period July 1959 to July 1960 because of absences from work due to illness. The loss represented close to three percent of that year’s gross national product. On an average day 1,800,000 persons were out of work because of disease or disability. Put another way, the annual losses to our economy due to illness and disability are as great as if the United States economy were to remain totally idle for more than a week.
President Johnson has declared war on poverty. We are not


going to eliminate poverty unless we also attack one of its major con-


comitants—ill health and disability. The connection is clear and


ummistakable. Those parts of the country with the lowest economic


productivity have the highest incidence of disease and disability.


Health is a basic human right, irrespective of political


belief, income status, race or religion. To put a price tag on health


is to put a dollar sign on life itself.


Congress has been a major force, particularly in the years


since World War II, in shaping a national purpose and a deep commitmen-
t on the part of the federal government to the fuller realization of this


right. In the 1940's a congressman named John Fogarty launched a campaign


for increased federal participation in medical research and for larger


appropriations for health programs. The senior Senator from Alabama,


Lister Hill, has since taken the lead among my colleagues in the Senate


in carrying on this crusade for better health.


President Truman said at another Albert Lasker awards ceremony


nine years ago: "In this battle, there is no room for political or


professional rivalries. In a war against disease we cannot tolerate


false economy—we cannot tolerate timidity—we will not tolerate


indifference."


It is in that sense that you honor, today, Congressman Oren


Harris of Arkansas and Melvin A. Laird of Wisconsin, two men who have


championed the cause of raising the standard of health in the United
States. In addition, you honor representatives of the newspaper, magazine and television world who have earned coveted Lasker awards for distinguished reporting of medical developments.

All of you who are dedicated to medical research and to the reporting of it to the public play a role in a magnificent story—one of the most exciting in our history. It is a story of an amazing advance in the science and technology of health and also in the distribution of its benefits. Yet, despite this advance the state of America's health remains unfinished business of the nation. It was so labeled by the late President Kennedy. It is so regarded by President Johnson.

In 1961, in the first of three annual health messages which Mr. Kennedy sent to the Congress, he said:

"The health of the American people must ever be safeguarded; it must ever be improved. As long as people are stricken by a disease which we have the ability to prevent, as long as people are chained by a disability which can be reversed, as long as needless death takes its toll, then American health will be unfinished business."

"It is to the unfinished business in health—which affects every person and home and community in this land—that we must now direct our best efforts."

President Kennedy's special message of February 5, 1963 hailed a new day for the most neglected and ostracized of our citizens, the mentally ill and the mentally retarded. Legislation enacted last October provides close to $700 million in federal funds for a large scale attack on these twin illnesses. The legislation was described by President Kennedy as "the most significant effort that the Congress of the United States has ever undertaken on behalf of human welfare and happiness." I believe that this legislation stands as one of the great and enduring monuments of his Administration.
President Johnson, in a special health message on February 10th of this year, told the Congress:

"Cancer, heart disease and strokes stubbornly remain the leading causes of death in the United States. They now afflict 15 million Americans--two-thirds of all Americans now living will ultimately suffer or die from one of them...I am establishing a Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer and Strokes to recommend steps to reduce the incidence of these diseases through new knowledge and more complete utilization of medical knowledge we already have."

And President Johnson has called, again, for action on the hospital and nursing needs of older citizens. No rationalization will conceal the fact that these needs are not being adequately met at the present time. The President has asked for action in this session of the Congress. Insofar as I am concerned, I am prepared to see to it that the Congress faces this issue even if it means another twelve months' session. There is not a nation with a modern medical technology which has not already met this problem on something better than a hit or miss basis. There is not an advanced nation in the world, from Canada to Germany, to the Soviet Union to Japan which does not see to it--on a nationwide basis--that older citizens are assured, at a minimum, of a reasonable access to hospital and nursing care, not as a matter of charity but as a dignified matter of right. Other nations have found the means and methods to meet this responsibility towards their elderly. It borders on a national disgrace that we have pled national poverty or raised the specters of ideology as a justification for evading this issue for so long.
At the turn of the century, the great physician Sir William Osler wrote:

"Humanity has but three great enemies: fever, famine, and war; of these by far the greatest, by far the most terrible is fever."

Over the past several decades, we have made more progress against disease and achieved more knowledge of the workings of the human body than in all the previous centuries of recorded history combined. If we continue our national investment in medical research, and see to it that its fruits are widely disseminated and made available to those in need the world may well witness a Golden Age of Medicine.

As of now, we are still far short of this goal. We are short of it at home for all of our citizens. And while this nation is among the one-third of the world which enjoys relatively good health, long life and high standards of living, two-thirds of the human race has an average life span of about thirty-five years, and is plagued by infectious but curable and preventable diseases of all kinds.

Every minute somewhere in that two-thirds of the world twenty people die from malaria, tuberculosis or intestinal infections. Twenty human beings—twenty persons have died in the last minute who might have lived. We might well ask ourselves: What meaning did nuclear war or a nuclear test ban treaty have for them? What do any of the great world issues which preoccupy us really mean to tens of millions who live, throughout their lives, in or on the verge of ill-health, on the verge of an unnecessary and premature death?
And what of the world's 60 million handicapped people? Dr. Rusk has aptly termed rehabilitation "a tool which can penetrate any Iron or Bamboo Curtain to reach the minds and the hearts of men."

Have we used to the full what we already know to help in the rehabilitation of the handicapped? The truth is that we have not even done so at home, let alone throughout the world.

Here, then, is a great task which, beyond ideology, beyond boundaries confronts all nations: To use the great enlightenment and available resources of our times to heal the hurt, to cure the sick, to help the helpless.

The question which the world's peoples ask in this connection is not who will bury whom. It is who will give life to whom and to how many? The answer which we give to that question is critical. For there is a fifth freedom to which all peoples aspire. It is freedom from ill-health. And both at home and in the world we are called upon to make a great concerted effort to uphold and to advance this freedom.