



August 17, 2004

To the Editor:

I am writing in response to your Sunday, August 15, 2004 article entitled, "Bush Forces a Shift in Regulatory Thrust."

The article focuses in part on two OSHA regulatory measures intended to prevent tuberculosis (TB) exposure in health care settings. The first was a proposed TB rule that has since been withdrawn, due to the lack of science to support it; the second, is a new mandate requiring the annual fit-testing of respirators for occupational exposure to TB. This requirement went into effect without first allowing a public comment period – a blatant breach of the Administrative Procedures Act – and is also without scientific merit.

The Association for Professionals in Infection Control and Epidemiology (APIC) has long led the opposition to these OSHA policies, working with a cadre of well-respected nonprofit organizations that span the spectrum of health care. APIC has approximately 10,000 members, the majority of whom are nurses first and infection control professionals second. We want to be protected from occupational hazards such as TB – but we are already protected by guidelines issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) – and as a result of the widespread implementation of these recommendations, and the efforts of our public health community, TB in this country is at the lowest level in recorded history.

This is not an issue of jeopardizing worker safety through the reduction of regulations. The tail-end of the Post article mentions that health care groups now are fighting this OSHA annual respirator fit-testing mandate – but what the public may not understand is that, like the proposed OSHA TB regulation (which has been withdrawn), this fit-testing mandate is not supported by scientific evidence.

Furthermore, this is not a worker versus industry issue. We are health care workers and we know we are already protected by the CDC guidelines. How is it that the lay opinions of labor unions – including the American Federation of Teachers and the United Steelworkers – can overshadow the lack of scientific evidence for regulations in this area? Why did OSHA mandate annual respirator fit-testing for occupational exposure to TB without offering a period of public comment, and while ignoring the science? These are questions we are still grappling with – but meanwhile, we do not want the public to have a false perception about the level of risk that health care workers face for

contracting TB disease. Rather than mandating unproven, unreliable and unnecessary ritualistic practices such as annual fit-testing, the federal government should instead focus on ensuring dedicated funding for TB control efforts at the public health level – efforts that are proven to be effective.

The control of TB in this country continues to depend upon the collaboration, communication and dedication of the public health and health care communities. However, the misdirection of our limited and precious health care dollars toward unproven, unnecessary and unreliable practices is entirely unjustified.

Sincerely,

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2004 APIC President