Solid Waste Management: The Issue Is Bigger Than Diapers

The following statements are quoted from a June 15, 1990 Wall Street Journal article entitled, "States Mull Rush of Diaper Regulations."

"Already, some 20 states have pondered proposals that range from disposable—diaper taxes to all-out bans of disposables.

"Disposable diapers make an appealing environmental target... And, on one level, diaper statistics sound alarming: The average tyke goes through 7,800 diapers in the first 130 weeks of life. Some 18 billion disposable diapers end up in landfills each year."

The statistics are indeed startling, yet they represent only a small portion of a developing problem in our society. Solid waste management, the issue of where and how to dispose of all the used materials (garbage) generated by homes, business, and industry, has become a "hot topic" of the 1990's. This article takes a look at why garbage is becoming an issue, the facts about solid waste, and the myopia of focusing upon disposable diapers as the culprit.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that the average American generates 3.3 pounds of garbage a day not recycling. Although we are not increasing our output per individual, the population is increasing at the same time that the availability of existing landfills is decreasing. On top of this, fewer communities are willing to accept landfills within their boundaries while the charges for dumping waste are increasing. A March 1990 Newsweek article reports that "Between 1985 and 1988, average tipping fees—the cost of dumping a ton of garbage in a landfill—jumped from $12 to $27..." In the meantime, the Newsweek article continues:

"Between 1970 and 1986, population and economic growth increased total trash by 31 percent.

The problems and potential solutions related to solid waste management, are not really well understood by either the American public or our elected law makers. Worse still, there are common misperceptions which persist. For instance a common belief exists that plastics comprise a large part of American garbage. In fact, plastic waste represents only 8% if measured by weight, or 12-13% when measured by volume. What then is the composition in our landfills? According to the EPA: paper and paperboard, 41.0%; yard wastes such as leaves and grass clippings, 17.9%; glass, 8.2%; metals, 8.7%; rubber, leather, textiles, wood, 8.1%; and food waste 7.9%.

Another public concern is the contamination of ground water. Newsweek cites a government study which concluded that medical wastes pose almost no problems because bacteria and viruses tend to die in landfills. A greater worry in older landfills comes from certain metals and chemical solvents. However, new landfill construction is designed to prevent ground water pollution. Not only are new sites lined with plastics and impermeable clay, but drainage pipes collect water for recovery and treatment.

Solid waste can also be incinerated. Some incinerators convert garbage into electrical power for their communities. Like any other waste management technique, environmental issues such as possible air pollution and safe disposal of ashes must be addressed.

In the search for answers to waste disposal problems, the terms biodegradable and photodegradable are often

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Simon Says...

HAVE A GOOD HOSPITAL STAY...

Many of our readers write to us about their encounters in the hospital, often raising concerns about how to handle the experience. From the American Cancer Society newsletter comes the following helpful poem:

"Dear Visitors one and all,
I'm very happy when you call,
I'm glad that you have come.
You make me know that I'm a special one.
But as you can see I'm not very strong.
So please don't make your visit long."

Post it on your door and give visitors a smile along with a guideline as to how to behave!

MORE SIMON MEMBERS JOIN PEN PAL CLUB... Lately, mail has brought a constant stream of letters from people who say "Print my name." Here are the names and addresses of future IPPY's (Incontinent Pen Pals Yapping): Monika Laivinieka, 476 Sussex Court, Buffalo Grove, Illinois 60089; Herman W. Johnson, P.O. Box 777, Freeport, Texas 77541; Ms. Jo Anne White, 1990 Stephens Street, Aurora, Illinois 60504; Mike Smith, P.O. Box 1741, Big Pine Key, Florida 33043; Mr. Lynn Kobliisky, 2318 Emma Lee Street #202, Falls Church, Virginia 22042; Hank J. Hurst, 73 North Henry Street, Apt. 1, Brooklyn, New York 11222; Robert Leskin, 234 Springfield Road, Linden, New Jersey 07036; Mrs. Carol Johnson, 319 Longmeier Street, Buffalo, New York 14206; Stan Januck, c/o American , 6013 W. Bluemound Road, Milwaukee, Wisconsin 53219; Arthur L. Jackie; 990 East 346th Street; Eastlake, Ohio 44095; Paul Gennrich (age 40), 1109 Hickory Street, Hinesville, Georgia 31313; Myrtle E. Griffin, 6315 55th Avenue N #321, Crystal MN 55428.

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BLADDER PROBLEMS IN THE NEWS...

"The arrest of a woman who used the men's room at a concert when she couldn't get into the women's washroom has generated a groundswell of support," reports the Chicago Tribune. Denise Wells was arrested July 7 at a George Strait concert when she observed a fellow take his girlfriend into the men's room. Deciding the man was going to run interference, Wells tagged along and an officer arrested both women. The accompanying ticket for violating a Houston city ordinance that forbids members of one sex from using toilets reserved for the other was $200.

Although the Simon Foundation does not support breaking the law, this incident which is receiving national press coverage, will help to highlight the needs of people with bladder disabilities.

A NEW AGENCY IN WASHINGTON holds hope for future improvements in the field of urinary incontinence. The Agency for Health Care Policy and Research, a part of the Department of Health and Human Services, was established to "enhance the quality, appropriateness and effectiveness of health care services and access to such services. The mission of the Agency is to be carried out through the establishment of a broad base of scientific research, and through the promotion of improvements in clinical practice and in the organization, financing, and delivery of health care service." The following topics were the first items selected for guideline development: Visual Impairment Due to Cataract in the Aging Eye; Diagnosis and Treatment of Benign Prostatic Hyperplasia; Urinary Incontinence in the Adult; Prediction, Prevention and Early Treatment of Pressure Sores in Adults; Delivery of Comprehensive Care in Sickle Cell Disease; Pain Management; and Diagnosis and Treatment of Depressed Outpatients in Primary Care Settings. Two of the Simon Foundation's Board of Directors have been chosen to help develop these guidelines.

THOUGHT FOR THE DAY... Patient to doctor: "This prescription has one side effect: poverty." "Throughout history the most common debilitating human ailment has been cold feet." (authors unknown)

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REQUEST FOR MEMBERSHIP

Yes, I would like to be a member of the Simon Foundation for Continence. Please mail to me the Foundation's quarterly newsletter, The Informer. Enclosed is $15.00 for my membership. I understand that all mailings will come to me in an unidentified envelope.

The Simon Foundation
P.O. Box 815
Wilmette, IL 60091

Name __________________________
Address ________________________
City ____________________________
State ___________________________
Zip Code _______________________

NOTE: Your annual membership will begin with the next edition of the Informer.
Contributions and membership in the Simon Foundation are tax deductible.
Letters To The Editor

Dear Informer:

I just received my second Informer and found within it the same advice that I found in the first, namely "see a doctor and avail yourself of the many miracles of modern medicine." This advice ignores a fact of life: all of these treatments and cures cost money.

I am a blue collar worker employed by a small company that does not offer medical insurance. At the age of 50 I am grateful just to be employed. I earn enough to cover expenses with little left over. I cannot afford medical insurance. I cannot afford disposable products. A visit to a doctor's office would cost me the equivalent of one week's groceries. I'd rather eat.

I've been incontinent for 14 years as the result of nerve damage from a broken neck. I am fully ambulatory and quite active. Texas catheters and leg bags do not work well for one that is active, nor one that works outside during Arizona summers. I have learned to fabricate cloth diapers and sew a plastic pant, find them quite satisfactory.

I'm certain that there are others in similar circumstances. You might give a thought to those of us that are finding medical treatment beyond the scope of our budgets.

Phoenix

Dear Phoenix:

Your position is completely clear and totally understood. Tragically, millions of Americans can no longer afford health insurance. Because incontinence is a symptom of something else going wrong in the body, it is imperative that everyone see a doctor. This continued on back

Thank You. (Editor's Note: This issue of The Informer was underwritten by an educational grant from Kimberly-Clark Corp., makers of Depend®. The Simon Foundation does not endorse specific incontinence products or medical treatments. Inclusion in this column in no way implies endorsement.)

Solid Waste

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discussed. Photodegradable material requires the presence of light and it is unlikely that an object buried deep in a landfill will be exposed to light. With respect to degradable materials, a Harvard archeologist has focused his life's work on research concerning landfills. His studies have shown that conditions for biodegradability are not ideal in landfills. For example, newspapers have been recovered in perfectly readable condition although their publication date show they were buried many years previously.

The complexities of protecting the environment while finding answers to solid waste disposal issues is a problem which cannot be solved by focusing attention on diapers, an item which, incidentally, accounts for less than 2% of the nation's garbage. Adult incontinence products sold by all manufacturers in the United States represents only 0.1 percent of all municipal solid waste according to a Procter and Gamble booklet on the subject. Some observers suggest that the solution to the "diaper problem" lies in replacing disposables with reusable cloth diapers. While this may be possible for babies and some people with incontinence, it is doubtful that the majority of adults who use incontinence products would find it possible to completely switch to reusables. The point is moot, because once again the issue is very complex. Although more research is needed, preliminary studies point out that there is no clear-cut case for which product is more environmentally sound. Variables such as raw material usage, post-consumer waste, the effect on other important energy and water resources used in manufacturing, and air pollution emissions must be carefully considered apart from the focus on a specific product. In addition, the effect of each product on good skin protection must be taken into account.

Wherein lies the solution to solid waste disposal in the 1990's? Should we have more landfills, better incineration techniques, composting, recycling, special taxes and fees to be used as incentives and disincentives for environmental protection? Perhaps the solution lies in using a combination of all of the above management techniques in an informed manner so that each can be employed where most reasonable and applicable. The first step is a well-informed and concerned society combined with educated, ethical government representation. The entire solid waste disposal problem must be addressed to avoid the mistakes of quick stop-gap solutions based on unwarranted focus on specific products or the undue influence of vested business interests. As members of the Simon Foundation for Continence we will all benefit from a well thought-out and thoroughly researched long-range solution which can benefit this generation and those generations who follow us.

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Consult your physician about bladder control problems.
Dear Ms. Gartley:
Thank you so much for printing my letter. I literally could have stood up and cheered when I read it. I am a widower and haven’t dated much since my wife died. Part of my reluctance to do so is due to my incontinence. Well, something really neat has happened. I have been seeing a lady for several months. She invited me to a concert in Orlando (about 150 miles away). Her son who lives there could easily get the tickets. The only fly in the ointment was that we would have to stay over night and because of the expense, share a room. I thought about it and said no.

Her son, in his youthful enthusiasm bought the tickets anyhow. When he called with this news, I again said no. I tried to make up a lot of excuses, but I guess they just didn’t hold up. Finally my friend asked me to level with her. It took me awhile, but I told her about my bedwetting and that I have to sleep in a diaper. She then told me that incontinence has happened to her on occasion when she sneezes or laughs. To make a long story short, we went to the concert and had a great time, although I’m not sure if our hearing will ever recover!

Mr. Beckwith’s letter on how to tell your sweetheart about your incontinence (Winter 1990 edition) helped. I guess I must have read it 20 times!

If you choose to print this please include my complete name and address. How is that for another big step? Remember when I wrote you, “Please don’t even think about printing my name?” This is a bit scary for me, but I feel that it will help me, and more importantly it may help someone else. Again, thanks for listening.

Craig C. Thompson
P.O. Box 405
Doctors Inlet, FL 32030

Dear Informer:
I am finally writing as I have intended for some time. What got me off my duff was your repeated message for people to continue to seek medical help until they are satisfied they have done all they can. I have had repeated urinary infections since I was a small child and have clear memories of being embarrassed by a teacher in fifth grade due to my incontinence. I couldn’t cough, sneeze, run, or jump without a leak, so I wasn’t very active as a child. As I got older I made a successful life for myself but I still had this nagging self-esteem problem to deal with. After two failed operations, I was very discouraged, felt that I had failed my doctors and became resigned to an incontinent life.

That spring there was an article in the Boston Globe about incontinence and the Simon Foundation. I wrote to you and called my local doctor. He referred me to a specialist who, after much evaluation, recommended surgery... the third in less than 2 years. I am glad to say there’s a charm! I have been DRY, DRY, DRY for almost three years for the first time in my life! Keep telling your readers to seek out the BEST medical advice. This country has many fine medical centers with the best treatment in the world available. Keep telling them to keep trying. New procedures, devices, and treatments are developed all the time.

Dear Massachusetts:
Thanks for the lovely affirmation that persistence pays off. Not everyone can find a cure for their incontinence. Unfortunately, those who wish to be cured must sometimes be persistent before they find someone knowledgeable and capable of helping them. However, things are changing. More attention is being paid to incontinence by all medical professionals, both in school and through continuing education courses.

Dear Informer:
I read with interest the letter from “Florida” in the last Informer. I’d like to assure the writer that most people couldn’t care less if you wear a diaper to bed or anywhere else since they’re usually too busy dealing with their own problems. I know this because I’ve “come out of the closet” completely.

I’ve had to wear a diaper part time for many years, and about 2 years ago, I lost almost all bladder control due to damage from bladder infections. I’ve been wearing a diaper 24 hours a day for those 2 years. I decided that it would be impossible to hide the fact, so I began to tell anyone that I had frequent contact with that I wear diapers. I haven’t lost any friends. I even wear shorts over my diapers since it’s so much cooler than long pants.

The recommendation that you gave to “Florida” was to pick a non-judgmental friend. I contend that ANY friend will not have a problem with you wearing a diaper. Please add my name to the pen pals list.

Paul Gennrich (age 40)
1109 Hickory Street
Hinesville, Ga. 31313

Dear Paul:
You are absolutely right. By definition of the word friend, the person would not care if you wore diapers. Like Ann Landers, I know when I should admit poor advice and eat my words. Consider them eaten.