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European death wish

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VIENNA, Austria. -- Human lifespans in developed countries have been increasing 15 seconds every minute for the past 125 years, and they are increasing even faster in the developing countries -- on average about 20 seconds every minute. This means that in Europe and America lifespans increase about one year over every four-year period. Why has this happened? In one word -- chemistry.

Chemistry enables us to develop the compounds that cure most childhood diseases. Chemistry provides us with the disinfectants that destroy dangerous germs in our everyday lives, clean our wounds, and make modern surgery possible. Chemistry enables us to have the protective clothing and gear that shield us from many injuries in the workplace and on the athletic field. Chemistry gives us the pesticides that defend our crops and ourselves from insect-borne diseases. Chemistry has enabled pharmaceutical companies to develop the products that help protect us from cancer, heart disease and thousands of other ailments that affect an aging population. Without modern chemistry, most of us would be dead.

All chemicals, both natural and synthetic, have a downside. Too much of almost any of them can kill us or make us ill. Even the most basic chemicals that are necessary for life can also be very dangerous. We need just the right level of oxygen in our air to live. We need water, but the wrong quantities it can lead to dehydration or dilution of the body's essential elements.

Take a look at the list of ingredients on your multivitamin and mineral package. The tablet is a combination of a couple of dozen chemicals, any one of which in excessive quantities might kill you. However, the total absence of many of these chemicals will also lead to poor health and premature death.

Knowledgeable people have long understood the need for but also the dangers in chemical compounds, and mankind has made great strides in getting the balance right, as demonstrated by ever increasing lifespans. But now, the European Union is about to take the Europeans, and to a lesser extent the rest of the world, in a giant step backward. A proposal known as "REACH" -- which stands for registration, evaluation and authorization of chemicals -- may soon become law in the European Union. In effect, the REACH proposal will require companies using any of more than 30,000 commonly used chemical compounds in their products (that daily protect and make our lives better) plus any new compounds they may develop to prove the chemical will do no harm in almost

any quantity. The proposal is sheer lunacy from both a health and a safety point of view, and will be economically destructive not only to Europeans but to those who export to or import from Europe.

The argument is that perhaps as many as 4,500 lives could be saved each year if people were not exposed to chemical compounds in excessive quantities. The science behind this number is highly doubtful, but what should be obvious is hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of lives will be put in danger each year as a result of banning both highly desirable, and in fact necessary, chemical compounds of one sort or another. The proposed regulations will be extremely costly to business, arbitrary in their effect, and so onerous on small and medium-size businesses that many of them will have to withdraw from the market.

If the Europeans pass the regulation, in one stroke they will have increased their already disastrous unemployment rates, and denied themselves many products they need for safe and healthy lives. The only winners will be all of the new bureaucrats who will be hired to administer the impossible.

In one bow to economic reality, the REACH proponents have agreed to exempt certain natural chemicals, foods, cosmetics and pesticides -- because they are regulated under other statutes. However, many of these products will likely be affected, as their ingredients are regulated under REACH -- some may be banned.

The Europeans have just been down a similar route. To try to prevent capital outflow -- which is caused by excessive taxation and regulation in a number of the European states -- they created the European Savings Directive. To get it passed and to mitigate the most economically destructive aspects of the proposal, they put in many loopholes. Now, the first year results are in, which show the Directive raised very little revenue, but greatly increased the administrative burden for the financial industry and did nothing to prevent capital outflow.

The good news is that more than 250 leaders and scholars from around the world (including many from the United States), representing both free market public policy organizations and taxpayer groups, met last week in Vienna at the largest ever European Resource Bank meeting. These scholars and political activists are working together to combat the economic and scientific know-nothings who dominate too much of the political discussion in Europe.

Let us hope, not only for the sake of Europe but for the global community, that their efforts will not be too little and too late.

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