

## *From the Kitchen*

25 August 2010



How many people occupy themselves with activity that does nothing to further the overall wellbeing of the human race or the planet as a whole? How many get paid for such activity and call it work? How many people do work that is demoralising?

Given that most of us live in a society, I would argue that whatever we do should in some way improve the whole of that society in some way – not just measured in terms of wealth or possessions or even overall health but bringing into the equation wellbeing, happiness and satisfaction. The small kingdom of Bhutan already includes happiness in its assessment of how well it is doing as a society. We can learn from this.

I would include in the list of activities that further overall wellbeing those things that do not necessarily produce material goods or essential services; such things as visual art, theatre, music and other entertainment, which definitely contribute to the overall wellbeing of a society. I would not include activities that create wealth for some individuals or organisations to the detriment of others. This would include many activities involving the manipulation of monetary and stock markets and activities that support the financial subjugation of weak States by stronger ones. Also included in my ‘spurious’ list would be some of the activities in the chemical, agriculture and pharmaceutical industries, the medical profession and the legal profession.

There are tens of thousands of human-made chemicals, many of them highly toxic and many of them about which we have no idea whether they are dangerous or not. Thousands of these are ‘feral’ in our environment; DDT was banned in the USA in 1972, yet still turns up in human breast milk there. How much other damage is being done?

Much of the world’s food production, especially in ‘developed’ countries, is in the hands of large, multinational companies which have little regard for national laws, nutritional needs of people or local conditions. They are only interested in protecting their bottom line, ignoring the wishes of the communities in which they operate. Monsanto has successfully sued (and continues to sue) farmers whose crops have been contaminated by neighbouring patented, genetically modified crops, through wind or insect action<sup>1</sup>. Many farmers have lost their farms and livelihood through this.

The pharmaceutical industry spends more on marketing than on research<sup>2</sup>. If what they produce is so important to society because it is vital to our health, why is all the marketing necessary? Who is benefiting? With patented medicines costing more than generics, these companies are also in the habit of ‘re-patenting’ older medicines after making only minor changes which have no bearing on potency or efficacy<sup>3</sup>. As for the efficacy of the drugs for which in Australia we pay billions of dollars through the Pharmaceutical Benefits Scheme, a

then senior executive at GlaxoSmithKline said in 2003 that more than 90% of drugs only work in 30% - 50% of the people for whom they are designed<sup>4</sup>.

Medical researchers, doctors and other healthcare workers are an important part of our world. However, there is a tendency towards 'big medicine': the use of expensive equipment which has some use but, because of the investment in it, is over-used. There is also a tendency towards finding ever more uses for techniques and procedures, such as unnecessary caesareans and non-essential cosmetic surgery. In the USA (and possibly worldwide) there are more people employed in the 'cancer industry' than there are people with cancer.

In Australia there is an unfortunate tendency to follow the USA trend of lawyers to create more work for themselves by convincing people to sue others, when they wouldn't have done so on their own initiative. Inadvertently, this pushes up the cost of goods and services, as it is usually companies that end up paying. That is not to denigrate class actions against companies that ought to pay for their misdeeds.

In all of these examples, there are legitimate roles for the businesses and professions. It is when their activities range outside what is morally defensible, that we need to question their legitimacy.

There are also activities that are in themselves legitimate, but their impact on the environment may test that legitimacy. Logging for timber is one such; where this destroys remnants of fully integrated forests and threatens species that rely on these forests, the activity needs to be questioned. Doing so for wood-chipping to make paper is indefensible, as there are other plants, such as hemp, that can be grown economically for that purpose. To continue the practice because it keeps several thousand people employed is also wrong – I believe it would be cheaper in the long-run to pay for these people to retrain for other occupations or even pay them a very good 'pension' for the rest of their lives. I would support similar arguments to ensure the protection of our waterways and I think it is reprehensible that governments are financially supporting the coal industry.

All of the industries I have mentioned engage in very active lobbying around our parliaments, aimed exclusively at getting politicians to support whatever the respective industry wants. What does this pressure on legislators do to them, when they should be prepared to make difficult decisions by weighing up all the competing claims and needs? As individuals, we only have these companies' advertising to deal with, and we can more easily ignore this than would be the case with individualised, targeted lobbying of politicians.

We owe it to ourselves, our descendants, our fellow human beings, all other species and the planet, to only undertake such work as enhances the wellbeing of all of these. How does your work measure up to this high ideal?

1. See for instance [www.i-sis.org.uk/MonsantovsFarmers.php](http://www.i-sis.org.uk/MonsantovsFarmers.php)
2. See for instance [www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/01/080105140107.htm](http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/01/080105140107.htm)
3. See for instance *The Truth About the Drug Companies* by Marcia Angell, Random House, 2004
4. Quoted on the BBC: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/health/3299945.stm>