Once again, proponents of the precautionary principle have tried to convince us that we are always better safe than sorry." Dr. Bruce Barrett recently published an article in favor of using this poorly defined doctrine to govern public health issues, making it in effect an institutionalized "fear factor." [1]

The UN Rio Declaration of 1992 [2] states that "In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation." As applied, the principle would cause various scientific activities and technologies to be banned, even after tests have failed to show demonstrable harm. It turns out that there may actually be more risk in using this principle than in not using it, as it often leads to rejection of the same technological advances that have enhanced human health and longevity.

Advocates of the precautionary principle make arguments that reveal their stance as ideological and anti-technological. Barrett dramatically claims that due to under-researched chemicals and industrialization, "humanity now threatens the existence of hundreds of species, and perhaps the long-term health of the planet as a whole." [1] He argues that there are "ethical responsibilities" to interrupt even alleged and potential threats posed by humans. He should remember, though, that we also have an ethical responsibility to use technological resources to move humanity forward and save lives. Barrett calls for more regulation and "better science." Clearly, though, "better science" comes only from research and innovation.

Proponents of the precautionary principle must know that nothing is completely risk-free. Of course, risks must be evaluated for any new product or technique, but limits must be set as to how much proof of risk is necessary before innovations are banned. No matter how many risks we prove untrue there will always be unknowns, and focusing on these minor or hypothetical threats will greatly impede productive activities. The risk of inaction must also be considered when bans are placed on the development of potentially groundbreaking procedures and practices -- banning them can produce risks in itself. ACSH president Dr. Elizabeth Whelan cites the examples of pesticides and pharmaceuticals in a 2000 editorial and uses the case of chlorine to counter the precautionists [3]. Chlorine, while poisonous at high exposures, is needed to disinfect our water supply, to make necessary pesticides, and to create lifesaving medications. While there are no proven harmful effects from appropriate use of chlorine, and while it has proven to be lifesaving, precautionary principle advocates still argue against chlorine because of hypothetical risks. Further examples can be found in the cases of blood transfusions and organ transplants, both undeniably major advances in medical therapy. Furthermore, had the precautionary principle been used fifty years ago, virtually no pharmaceuticals would be available today. Had it been in effect one
hundred years ago, the automobile and air travel would never have been developed.

In addition, fearing all of the possible minor risks of a product or activity takes up time, money, and resources that should be used instead on research, prevention, and treatment efforts -- such as water chlorination [4].

The precautionary principle is an anti-progress, anti-technology ideology that would cause the health of our nation to stagnate instead of steadily improving. Proponents of this principle are blind to the benefits of technology and want amateur critics to have ultimate power to inhibit the work of qualified scientists -- "just in case."

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