Public Health in Peril

By BOB HERBERT

It was almost exactly a year ago, during a campaign appearance in Pennsylvania, that George W. Bush said: “Every environmental issue confronts us with a duty to be good stewards. As we use nature's gifts, we must do so wisely. Prosperity will mean little if we leave future generations a world of polluted air, toxic lakes and rivers, and vanished forests.”

He said it with a straight face.

He must have known, even as he spoke, that his home state of Texas was an environmental disaster zone. The Sierra Club summed the matter up as follows: “Texas ranks first in toxic releases to the environment, first in total toxic air emissions from industrial facilities, first in toxic chemical accidents, and first in cancer-causing pollution.”

Tom (Smitty) Smith, director of the public interest group Texas Public Citizen, said in a reference to Mr. Bush’s tenure as governor, “Every chance that Bush has had, he's stood up for the polluters.”

So we probably shouldn't have been surprised three weeks ago when President Bush reneged on his campaign pledge to seek reductions in carbon dioxide emissions, a policy decision that deeply embarrassed his own environmental protection administrator, Christie Whitman.

Nor was there reason to be surprised when he turned his back on the Kyoto accord, the international treaty on global warming. Or when he withdrew new regulations requiring a substantial reduction in the permissible levels of arsenic in drinking water.

Even some Republicans are reacting with dismay. Christopher Shays, a G.O.P. congressman from Connecticut, said his daughter, a college student, wanted to know “what the heck is happening with our party when it comes to the environment.”

But it's not just the environment. A couple of weeks ago we learned that the president would seek to cut funding for day care for poor children, for programs to combat child abuse and neglect, and for an important initiative to train pediatricians and other doctors at children's hospitals...
across the country.

We shouldn't have been surprised by that, either.

After all, we learned last summer, even as Mr. Bush was vowing to "leave no child behind," that the state of Texas had not bothered to comply with a 1996 consent decree requiring it to provide appropriate health care services to more than 1.5 million children who were eligible for Medicaid. A federal judge ruled, among other things, that the state had failed to inform indigent families about the availability of health services, that managed-care plans to which some indigent Texans had been assigned were not providing the required services, and that approximately one million eligible individuals had received no dental care.

Susan Zinn, a San Antonio lawyer who filed a class-action lawsuit that led to the consent decree, said, "Basically, what we have is a Medicaid program in shambles."

Mr. Bush's most important decision during the campaign was his selection of a running mate, and he chose Dick Cheney. Mr. Cheney has an avuncular persona, and that can fool you. When he was in Congress he had an absolutely extreme right-wing voting record, and his votes on issues of importance to children were shameful. He voted repeatedly against funding for Head Start, although he now says he is for it. He voted against subsidizing school lunches for poor children. He voted against aid to college students.

So there is no real reason now to be surprised that the Bush-Cheney administration is attempting to do serious damage to programs that help children.

Nor should we be surprised at the disclosure in yesterday's Times that the president will propose deep cuts in a variety of health programs for people without health insurance.

Adam Clymer, the Times reporter who was mocked by Mr. Bush, reminded us last April that "Texas has had one of the nation's worst public health records for decades." The state ranked near the top in rates of AIDS, diabetes, tuberculosis and teenage pregnancy, and near the bottom in immunizations, mammograms and access to physicians.

There is no telling how much bad news lies ahead. On a whole range of issues, the president appears committed to bringing the Texas model to the rest of the nation.