



MICRONESIAN SEMINAR

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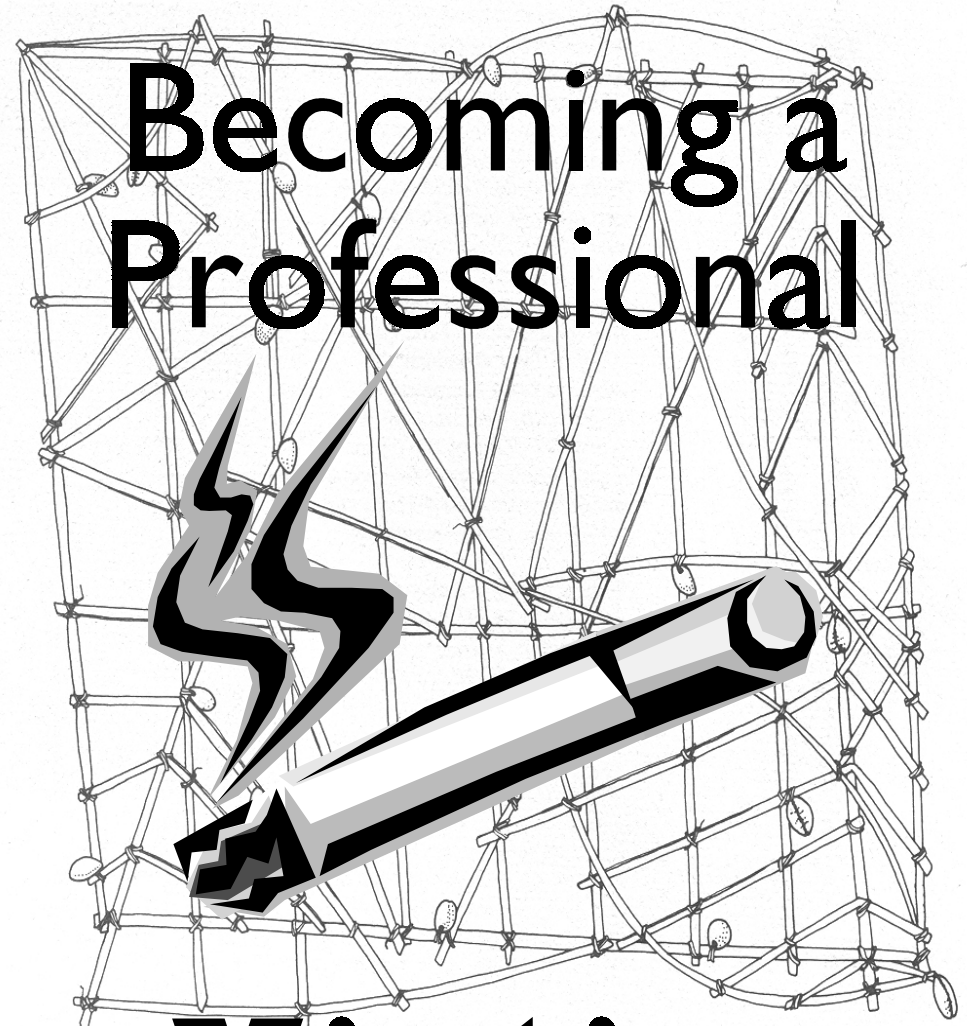


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Becoming a Professional



Victim

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MicSem Discussion Forum

Cholera isn't the only problem that Micronesia faces. How about the **victimization disease**? This is the topic of MicSem's current forum discussion. Post your comments online, or just visit to see what others have written.

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At a mission conference in Aachen, Germany, about five years ago I had what was to be a memorable conversation with a West African man about the situation in his country. When I asked him how his country was doing, he replied, aggressively more than sadly, that it was not doing well at all. There was political instability, unrest about the poor economic showing of recent years, and many other problems facing his people. Before I could ask him about any of these problems, he started in on a long list of grievances—the depredations made by the early slave trade, years of colonialism, and the exploitation of his and other African nations by lending institutions leading to the enormous national debt that burdens them even today. From start to finish, he told me, his nation had been victimized by forces beyond their control. The slave trade and colonialism were evils perpetrated by Western nations, he said. AIDS was unleashed by natural forces just as malevolent as the first. No matter what problem was mentioned, my African friend regarded it as another crippling blow from the hand of fate.

Racism, global forces, disease—all were drawn up against this man and his nation. What could he and his fellow citizens do? I walked away from the conversation thinking that whatever this man and his people suffered from, they were afflicted with an even more lethal malady—something that we might call victimization. What good would it do to work out strategies for restructuring the national debt? The nations of the world were aligned against his country. Political reform was not worth talking about, since the country had been hopelessly contaminated by its colonial masters. He was in the grip of a paralysis that had rendered him powerless over his life. He was a self-defined victim.

Whenever I recall this conversation, I think of the Marshalls, which has had its share of misfortunes. Like other parts of Micronesia, the Marshalls was battered during the last world war. A few hundred Marshallese lost their lives during the hostilities, including about 140 on Jaluit during a single bombing raid. No



added its bit to the disease burden, it was far from the most serious of the health problems in the Marshalls.

Even if tobacco use were responsible for destroying our population, whom should we blame for this problem? We can't blame the American tobacco companies for introducing the weed to the Marshallese people, since that happened sometime in the mid-19th century. Pohnpeians were already using tobacco as a medium of exchange in the 1840s, and tobacco plantations were being cultivated in Palau by 1870. (Guamanians, the first in Micronesia to grow tobacco, already had plots in front of their house in the early 1700s.) When I first came to Micronesia in 1963, I found many people smoking although there were no billboards, commercials or other advertisements urging them to smoke. I would imagine that people smoked because they had seen others doing so, surely not because of any advertising campaign mounted by the tobacco companies.

The basic question, then, comes down to this: Who is responsible for the toll taken by smoking? If we can point to someone else, then we can limp through life, drawing attention to our scars and blaming others for the damages we have suffered. We can continue to expect them, not ourselves, to see us through our future needs. The US dispossessed us of our lands, nuked us, and then poisoned us again through the tobacco they sold us. They did all this maliciously. Because what they have done has destroyed our past, they owe us our future.

Is this the best that the Marshalls can do? Not from what I've seen. The Marshalls has too many good things going for it. It has a talented and resourceful people, a credible new government administration, and an upbeat attitude toward the future. I'd like to see the Marshalls build on this and stay far removed from anything that would tempt them to take on the mindset of my African acquaintance, the perpetual victim.



For these reasons I find myself on the unpopular side in the current tobacco case. It's not that I want to see the Marshallese cheated that I take this position, but because I do not want them to cheat themselves for some alluring short-term gain. In my opinion, the paralysis brought on by the mindset I am calling victimization is a far bigger threat to the Marshallese people than the admittedly dangerous product that American tobacco companies make. To put the matter simply, I am doing everything I can to ensure that the Marshalls does not find a comfortable spot at the side of the road from which it can jingle the change in its cup while shrugging off responsibility for its future.

The use of tobacco is not a wise health choice, we can all agree. Yet, to say that the tobacco companies are responsible for this unwise choice is like saying that the companies that market ramen and other high-sodium foods are responsible for the hypertension that is so common in the Marshalls. Lung cancer occurs in the Marshalls, of course, but the most serious health problems are heart disease and diabetes. While not ignoring the dangers of smoking, health officials have urged again and again that the greatest health problem in the population is related to diet and lifestyle: too little exercise and too much salty and fatty foods. According to a report drawn from health records on causes of death in the Marshalls between 1994 and 1997, the leading cause of death was diabetes. Nearly one out of five Marshallese died of diabetes-related conditions. Almost seven times as many people died of diabetes as of lung cancer during this four-year period. Indeed, twice as many people died of suicide (48) as of lung cancer (22). Heart disease, which claimed 106 lives during this period, was one of the major causes of death in the Marshalls. Smoking may have contributed to the high rate of heart disease, but so did a lack of exercise and poor diet, the same factors that figure into the extraordinarily high rate of diabetes in the Marshallese population. In all likelihood, a generally unhealthy lifestyle was a greater factor in bringing on heart disease than simply smoking. While tobacco



sooner did peace come to the islands than the populations of two atolls were removed from their ancestral homes so that these islands could be used as nuclear test sites. About a dozen years and some seventy explosions later, the people from the test sites were still homeless. Meanwhile, scores of Marshallese were affected by exposure to radiation during the tests, especially the famous Bravo test of 1954 whose fallout affected the populations of the neighboring islands of Rongelap and Rongerik.

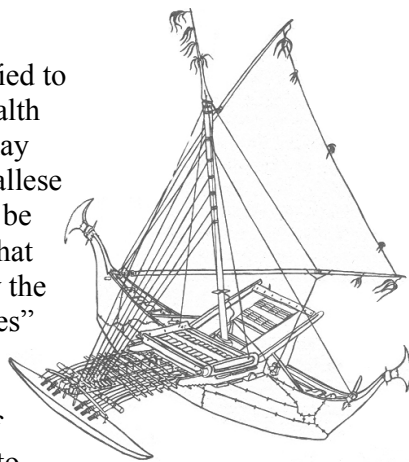
The misery that many Marshallese people suffered is undeniable. Perhaps no monetary compensation can redress these past wrongs. What worries me is that it might compound the damage done them. Whatever injuries and bodily problems they may have suffered, Marshallese at least retained their indomitable spirit. They once thought of themselves as survivors—as they were indeed. As pleas for compensation multiply and the road to the claims court becomes more clogged, I fear for this spirit. When people begin to regard themselves as no more than victims, their fate is fixed. They may be found sitting by the side of the road with their tin cup, waiting until others—the villains of the past—fill it with coins. The danger is not that they derive profit from what they have suffered (which they may well deserve), but that they may come to see themselves as helpless in the face of the firestorms unleashed on them by the fates and their enemies. It would be a shame if the Marshallese, like the African I spoke with at the conference, excused themselves from the responsibility of improving their economy, their homes, their health on the grounds that they were merely victims. “Our fate is in our stars,” Marshallese might well be tempted to say. And their fate is simply to be abused by any and all comers.

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Take, for instance, the matter of compensation for the effects of nuclear fallout on some island populations in 1954. Beyond any question, damages were due those many people who as a result of their exposure to fallout from the Bravo explosion suffered subsequent health problems. Accordingly, a settlement was made between US and the Republic of the Marshalls as part of the Compact of Free Association. A few years later, as papers from US Department of Energy files came pouring into the Marshalls, thanks to the Freedom of Information Act, the Government of the Marshalls claimed “changed circumstances.” Some of the new information that has come to light suggests that the US may have known of the possibility of a last-minute wind shift that would carry fallout over other atolls but allowed the test to be carried on anyway. The supposition is that the US Department of Energy would have welcomed the chance to test the effects of radiation on human population, all the more so if this were to happen “accidentally.”

If those Americans making the decisions on the nuclear testing ever did so with even the slightest hope they would have a chance to use human guinea pigs, their actions would be shameful and indefensible. The point is not whether such an action is good or bad; that is obvious. The question is what should be done about it. Naturally, the victims should be provided for and efforts intensified to provide adequate testing and health care for any Marshallese who may have been affected. The Marshallese government, however, seems to be seeking punitive damages for what it regards as callous behavior by the US. The “changed circumstances” are not something reprehensible but a lucky break for the government, for the Republic of the Marshalls may now be able to



renegotiate the settlement for an even larger sum of money. None of this will change the past, wipe away the shame of what was done or help the victims that suffered for it. What it will do, however, is allow the Marshalls to pick up a fatter check that can be used for defraying the cost of government services today. Is there really anything wrong with this? Perhaps not, unless it feeds the tendency of people in the Marshalls to find a seat in the shade, rattle the change in their tin cup, and ignore their responsibility for making the government work, comfortable that they are once again victims who can do no more than rue the past and make claims on those responsible for their past misfortunes to create a future for them.

A few years ago the Government of the Marshall Islands entered a lawsuit against several US tobacco companies for about \$12 billion in damages. Tobacco companies have notoriously deep pockets, as some of the out-of-court settlements in the US have demonstrated. The argument that the Government of the Marshalls presented might be put something like this: “The tobacco companies seduced us, poor ignorant islanders that we are. They caused us to smoke, and in doing so they ruined our health. So, they should have to pay not just the medical bills that were the price of smoking, but also build for us in the future the health system that we have always dreamed of having. On top of this, of course, they will also have to pay big-time damages.”

We don’t have to be fans of the tobacco industry to pick up an off-key note in this querulous argument. The tune is one we’ve heard before: “We bear none of the responsibility for what has happened to us. We are the victims of one disaster after another. If it isn’t the Atomic Energy Commission or the Department of Defense that’s to blame, then it’s the American tobacco companies.” The chord is a familiar one: victimization.