OPINION

The MONTANA STANDARD
Founded 1876 | A Lee Enterprises Newspaper
25 W. Granite St., Butte, MT 59701
editor@mtstandard.com | mtstandard.com/news/opinion

Editorial Board
ANITA FASBENDER Publisher
DAVID MCCUMBER Editor and General Manager
KRISTIE CONSTANTINE City Editor

STANDARD VIEW SUPERFUND

Fund studies on health

For the last couple of weeks, Butte has been trying to figure out what to make of a recently published pilot study of metals content in the meconium of infants.

The researchers found the results of their "proof of concept" study of 15 Butte infants' meconium compared with that of babies in a South Carolina control group "shocking," and sufficiently urgent that the information was published in a peer-reviewed medical journal.

The EPA and several other agencies, including the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, very quickly began their own analysis. We applaud the energy and alacrity with which the agencies responded. It indicates that the agencies have both the capacity and the desire to ensure that Butte does not face unaddressed health hazards.

We are also grateful to Dr. Katie Hailer at Montana Technological University, who has worked very hard with very little budget to try to apply her scientific expertise to Butte's public-health challenges. The community, too, should be grateful; her expertise and her energy has been applied entirely in Butte's interest.

The results of EPA's analysis, which is ongoing — the agency will look more closely at data sets provided by Hailer and her fellow researchers — has led the agency to declare that it does not see an emergent public-health concern as a result of the Hailer-McDermott-Lead study.

Friday, ATSDR weighed in with a letter to state and local officials.

"In review of the publication, ATSDR does not concur with the author's closing statement of a 'potential public health emergency,' a statement that is not taken lightly by ATSDR," the letter said in part.

"Comparison ... to published results ... indicates that the meconium metal levels observed in Butte are within the range of those observed in other healthy study populations," the letter added.

While that is good news on its face, we do not believe this matter should end there.

We believe that much more in-depth research is required. We have for years advocated for ATSDR to look more deeply at the possibility of exposure hazards to Butte's population from mine and smelting waste. Researcher Suzanne McDermott's earlier statistical research on cancer, heart disease and organ failure mortality also should be considered.

There is not a broad constituency for such research, frankly. Many people here feel too much talk and attention has been given to potential health hazards, and that it has been counterproductive to economic development.

We cannot support that notion. It will only be after we get clear, unequivocal answers about health issues that we can move forward, and sweeping the issues under the rug will never bring the clarity we need.

We need federal help. The National Institute of Environmental Health should rapidly fund a comprehensive, independent, much more extensive study of fetal and infant health in Butte. Fifteen infants is not a sufficient study subject. The fact that this work has not previously been done here is in itself a failure of the system. We urge EPA to work with NIEH and ATSDR to make such a study happen, pronto.

We believe that the consent decree should clearly mandate, and fund, such research.

Atlantic Richfield and Butte-Silver Bow are required, as a remedial action under the Butte Priority Soils Record of Decision, to conduct a study of the community's health every five years. As a part of that, a Health Study Working Group has been formed over the past couple of years. The group's mandate is to define the scope and parameters of the next required health study. We are absolutely in favor of this. We know the Working Group members are putting in a lot of time and effort, for which we thank them. And once again we thank Karen Sullivan, county health officer, for her earnestness and hard work on public-health issues.

The working group is faced with many urgent questions that are really in the province of the public: Should the health study include non-Superfund-related potential health hazards? What should the geographical boundary of such a study be? Is the current blood lead monitoring sufficient? What other biomonitoring should be done? How should all of that data be archived and who should have access to it?

That group's meeting last Tuesday was the venue at which EPA and other agencies presented their evaluations of the Hailer-McDermott-Lead study. In this case the group met by teleconference.

No public notice of the meeting was given.

There is no way a body with the working group's mandate should be working in the dark. For one thing, many public agencies from every level are involved, from the Butte-Silver Bow Health Department to the Centers for Disease Control. While the working group has frequently invited certain community members — including, for example, Dr. Hailer — to participate, that's not good enough. Having this meeting in some hazy intersection between public and private is not good enough. Concerned members of the public should not have to rely on an individual invitation to attend such meetings.

After all, Article II, Section 8 of Montana's Constitution expressly spells out Montana citizens' right of participation. It is very clear. Public meetings are supposed to be public. We certainly expect Atlantic Richfield to respect that; Butte-Silver Bow is absolutely aware of this as county officials routinely notice many public meetings.

In the strongest terms, we urge the Superfund negotiators to make far more comprehensive health analyses of Butte a funded part of the Butte Hill consent decree. We trust the Working Group will come to that conclusion, and we hope that provision already exists in the CD draft we are all about to see.

Also, specifically, we urge EPA to work with other federal agencies to make funds available for a thorough infant metals exposure study.

And we fully expect to receive official public notice of every Health Study Working Group meeting going forward.

GUEST VIEW

Dyslexia law in effect

Senate Bill 140 (the Montana Dyslexia Screening and Intervention Act) was signed into law on May 1st of this year after receiving overwhelming bipartisan support from the Montana Legislature. This law describes indicators for dyslexia and requires schools to screen for and provide services to students with dyslexia. It was supported by the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) which is seeking to better support educator professional development and student achievement through the Montana Teach and Montana Learn initiatives.

ELSIE ARNTZEN

CARY SMITH

Identifying students at-risk for dyslexia early in their schooling provides educators the opportunity to support students who struggle with decoding and reading comprehension. While screening for dyslexia is not the same as diagnosing dyslexia, screening at-risk students helps provide important educational intervention information for families, educators, and school support staff. According to the Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity, roughly 20-percent of the population exhibits traits of dyslexia, and screening helps schools provide much-needed support for all students.

Article X of the Montana Constitution states that it is the goal of the people to establish a system of education which will develop the full educational potential of each person. The Dyslexia Screening and Intervention Act moves our state one step closer to realizing this Constitutional obligation by ensuring that students with dyslexia are supported in their learning environments.

The OPI has been working with educators and parents throughout this school year to ensure that the public is aware of this new law and that schools have resources to implement it, however, there is more work to be done for all students in Montana's over 800 public schools to be properly served.

We encourage school leaders, teachers, and parents to review the Dyslexia Screening and Intervention Act as well as the online resources available from the OPI. The OPI, along with the Board of Public Education, will provide a progress report to the Interim Education Committee of the Montana Legislature by September 2020.

Elsie Arntzen is Montana's State Superintendent of Public Instruction. Cary Smith of Billings represents Senate District 27 in the Montana Legislature and was the primary sponsor of SB 140.

THE READING LIFE

'Carnage' book detailed

What in God's name has happened to the Republican Party?

There was a time when Republicans actually believed in bipartisanship. President Reagan worked amicably with Tip O'Neill, Democratic Speaker of the House, even though the two men occupied opposite positions on the political spectrum.

HENRY GONSHAK

There was even an era when there were liberal Republicans, such as Nelson Rockefeller, Jacob Javits, and John Lindsay.

And if we travel back to the 19th century, Republicans were the party of Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation.

Today, in dramatic contrast, Republicans are simply the party of Trump, a man totally unqualified to be president (prior to winning the presidency, Trump never held elected office), who has banned Muslims from the country and demonized Latin American immigrants, most fleeing deadly drug gang violence, as "rapists," "terrorists" and an "invasion" (his administration has also separated immigrant children from their parents, housing them in squalid detention centers), who has alienated vital American allies in NATO and the European Union, who has defended white supremacists (calling the Neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville "very fine people"), who's pals with brutal dictators like Kim Jong-un and Vladimir Putin (Trump bought Putin's claim that Russia didn't meddle in the 2016 election, a claim refuted by every American intelligence agency), who's a serial sexual predator (in the Access Hollywood tape, Trump boasted that he grabs strange women "by the p***y"), and who bullied the president of a vulnerable American ally, Ukraine, threatening to withhold vital military aid already authorized by Congress unless Ukraine investigated Trump's political rival Joe Biden (the focus of the current impeachment inquiry).

In "American Carnage: On the Front Lines of the Republican Civil War and the Rise of President Trump," journalist Tim Alberta traces this catastrophic decline in a once-admirable political party.

A reporter who wrote for the conservative "National Review," Alberta seems to be a "Never Trumper" — that small, dwindling but hardy band of right-wing intellectuals and journalists who have refused to submit to the Trump imperium, a group including William Kristol, David Frum, and David Brooks (all of whom have been excommunicated by the Trump faithful for their apostasy).

Weighing in at over 600 pages, "American Carnage" is a long book — perhaps too long — but incredibly detailed. Alberta spends the first couple hundred pages reviewing the Bush and Obama administrations. Less patient or obsessive readers may want to skip what today seems like old news.

Since the book is focused more on reportage than analysis, Alberta spends little space exploring the larger explanations for Republican decline. Still, conclusions can be drawn.

Clearly, the party has drifted far from the mainstream into the orbit of the far-right. Because of Republican gerrymandering, most Republican congressmen (and they are almost all men) reside in safe districts. Thus, the danger for Republican candidates isn't the general election, when Republicans are almost certain to defeat their Democratic opponents, but rather the primaries, when an incumbent risks getting "primaried" by a candidate who flanks him to the right. It's a recipe leading Republicans to seek to be even more conservative than their opponents.

A failure to out-right-wing his challenger led to the demise of Congressman Eric Cantor, whom the Republican House Speaker, John Boehner, was grooming as his replacement. Cantor was "primaried" by a far-right academic, Dave Brat, who accused Cantor of supporting "amnesty" for illegal aliens because Cantor supported a "path to citizenship" for immigrants brought here illegally by their parents as children.

Later, Boehner himself was ousted from the speakership by the far-right Freedom Caucus because he had the temerity to try to work productively with President Obama. His ouster reflected a key example of the eviction of moderates from the Republican ranks.

What does the future hold for Republicans? No doubt, Trump will be impeached by Congress, since the House has a Democratic majority. But it's extremely unlikely impeachment will be approved in the Senate, since the Republicans, led by the odious Mitch McConnell, hold sway, and few members of Trump's party seem prone to break ranks.

Thus, it appears that voters will decide in 2020 whether or not Trump's Reign of Terror will continue for another four years.

Henry Gonshak is an English professor at Montana Tech. His column, "Reading Life," usually appears on the first Sunday of every month. He can be reached at: hgonshak@mtech.edu.

Submit a letter to the editor

The word limit for Readers Speak is 400, and although we give priority to letters from readers in our circulation area, we also welcome them from our online readers who still maintain strong ties to this area and will consider letters from other parts of the state. We require a phone number for confirmation, not publication. Letters will be edited for grammar and spelling, and we reserve the right to refuse letters deemed inappropriate.

To encourage a wide variety of authors, we ask that you limit submissions to one every 30 days. Exceptions are sometimes made to accommodate healthy dialogue, but for the most part we adhere to that policy.

Thanks in advance for your contributions. Letters liven up an editorial page like nothing else can. Questions? Call or e-mail Editor David McCumber at editor@mtstandard.com.

EMAIL SUBMISSION
Email your letter to the editor to editor@mtstandard.com.