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Precaution(s)

In recent decades, the precautionary principle has emerged in public debate. It is mentioned in numerous international political and legal texts and was incorporated into the French Constitution in 2005. However, as of 2014, the precautionary principle does not seem to be applied consistently.

The precautionary principle has become the subject of heated debate: for some, it is an essential safeguard to help protect the environment and human health from the excesses of certain scientists and corporate greed, while others see it as dangerous obstruction of science and progress. Its detractors raise the spectre of the death of innovation, warning that it deprives the economy and society as a whole of potential benefits.

To understand what is at stake, it is useful to reconsider the precautionary principle in light of the principle of responsibility, which in particular implies seeking to prevent harm rather than having to repair any damage incurred. Especially when the potential damage is severe or irreversible. Lawsuits against industry or policy makers are known to be difficult and slow, even when considerable harm has been done to human health or the environment. One can therefore only be in favour of requiring that the creators of risks exercise caution, and anticipate and minimise the risks

generated by their decisions and the activities that ensue.

Precaution is sometimes disparaged as timidity or fear of everything. But is it not more a case of acting wisely?

In the field of health care, taking precautions means abiding by the guiding principle of “first, do no harm”. For healthcare professionals, this means constantly giving as much consideration to harms as to benefits when deciding how best to advise patients. For health authorities, it should in particular mean rejecting new treatments that represent a step backwards compared to existing treatments, for example by refusing to tolerate drugs with plausible (and always underestimated) harms, when their benefits are minimal or uncertain.

Precaution means refusing to blindly trust that everything will turn out fine or to believe promises that are not truly or personally binding on those who make them. It means taking into account the errors and lessons of the past so that we do not rush to adopt the latest innovation, only seeing its promised benefits. Precaution also means taking sufficient time to evaluate innovations and to assess their harms as thoroughly as their benefits, in order to encourage real progress.

Prescrire