

Global environmental change

Published in the The Medical Journal of Australia 2000

Vol 172, p 164

The recent editorial by McMichael and Guest on global environmental change and human health hypothesised that there may be a fundamental causal link between increasing inequality and global environmental change.¹ It also mentioned public apathy, denial and complacency. Manipulation of the media - that which Beder calls "global spin" - provides one plausible mechanism by which the link between these factors may be traced.

There is a double standard out there: in most areas of science, including contentious areas such as genetically engineered crops, the "serious" press pays little attention to scientific dissenters, yet disproportionate credence has been given to an increasingly discredited group of "contrarian" climate scientists. For example, a widely circulated, though unpublished, paper co-authored by a leading contrarian scientist described rising carbon dioxide levels as "a wonderful and unexpected gift" which will produce an increasingly lush environment.² Several of the most prominent contrarians have admitted receiving substantial funding from the fossil-fuel industry.³

Unable or unwilling to publish in the conventional peer-reviewed scientific literature, such workers have used innovative ways to spread their message, including costly mass mailings and by publishing their own journals.² Clinicians, increasingly comfortable with evidence-based guides to aid decision making, rightly give little credence to anecdotal claims of outrageous benefit or harm. It may not be necessary for our media to be evidence-based, but the selective way in which it operates deserves far wider appreciation.

It is almost thirty years since the Medical Journal of Australia published its first editorial on global environmental change.⁴ Like the slowly boiling frog unaware of increasing danger warned of by Boyden,⁵ we now inhabit a world of steadily declining biodiversity, inexorably rising CO₂ levels and one where many concerns remain over the sustainability of food, fishery and aquaculture systems.⁶ Another important public health risk is that

of "extreme" climatic events, including more intense rainfall, stronger winds, rising sea levels and changes to the El Niño-La Niña cycle. These could also have major population health effects which will affect our region.

Our efforts in this century will be crucial. Humanity must cope with inevitable, ongoing environmental change, against a backdrop of increasing availability of weapons of mass destruction and increasing population. The entry of a substantial, countering health voice in this debate is not before time - it may be vital. Australians should play a far more active role.

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