

Global EcoHealth Network Launched At Site of The Broad Street Pump

It was not a pilgrimage which drew a group of mainly Australian people to the Broad Street pump in Soho on April 22nd 1997 - although it was inspiring to see the replica of the pump and to visit the John Snow pub nearby with its memorabilia and descriptions of the events of 1854. The gathering in fact represented the launch of the Global EcoHealth Network.

The foundation convenors of the Network were looking to Dr John Snow as their mentor in meeting the challenge of their colleagues. For example McMichaelⁱ argued in his book *Planetary Overload* that we can no longer take the survival of the human species for granted, that a dramatic rise in mortality and morbidity rates is possible in the next century and that unless we take action, the current improvements in population health may become short-lived. "To promote sustainable health amongst the world's people, committed actions will be required to promote the sustainable health of the Earth."

When Emeritus Professor of Epidemiology and Community Medicine at the University of Ottawa, John Lastⁱⁱ, summarised the literature on the impact of global environmental change on human health, he said, "We have very little time left in which to restore the vitality of the earth." He challenged us further by saying, "Judging by the scarcity of comment on the subject in medical journals, widespread public anxiety about the environment is not shared by many members of the medical profession."

As long ago as 1976 Marc Lalondeⁱⁱⁱ, in his address to the American Public Health Association, made comments on what he felt would be the fundamental determinant of our health in the long term; "I am thinking of the ecological, energy and resource limitations of this planet ...I know this matter goes well beyond the normal terms of reference of the health professional ... but as people who are manifestly concerned with the wellbeing of their fellow men and women, I would urge you to extend your mandate to future generations and to support the analysis and action necessary to ensure their survival."

In response to these challenges the Global EcoHealth Network was launched whilst reflecting on the task that faced Dr John Snow.

One hundred and forty years ago, cholera was considered by the leading medical and scientific community to be caused by a miasma, an emanation of noxious air, which had nothing to do with the drinking water. The following

poem displayed on the wall of the John Snow pub conveys the atmosphere.

The Miasma Song

It comes creeping
While you're sleeping
Rising from the dirt and grime
Odours rising, not surprising
Miasma in dust and slime

Science beckons, you ignore it
We have moved on since the Greeks
Look to water for the vector
Disease lies there for him who seeks

It comes quickly
Then you're sickly
Stomach aches and sickness comes
Miasma's there, the stench lies thickly
But only in the streets of slums

It comes only
And then so slowly
From the squalor of our streets
There the sewage drains down leats
And victims come from classes lowly

It is especially important to reflect that Snow was successfully able to act even without 100% certainty or a complete biological explanation. Nor did Snow act alone. He was able to persuade the local council to remove the pump handle. There is no evidence of any riot or disturbance when this happened - even though the Broad St pump was favoured by some for its taste. Though we don't know how Dr Snow was able to gain support from the local people it is tempting to speculate that he showed some of them his evidence. Perhaps he showed them one of the maps he had drawn. It is possible the non-scientific people, who had not been trained to believe the miasma theory, were able to understand Snow's arguments better than his medical and scientific peers. By supporting someone with a new idea there were no reputations to lose and no blinkers to remove.

There are similarities with today's public health issues. Though there are many scientists, especially non-medical, who are gravely concerned about the environmental crisis our planet faces, it is still true to say that this has not yet translated into a strong scientific lobby for globally sustainable policies. The medical profession has been

especially slow at taking seriously the health concerns of continued environmental degradation that is the risk to human health.



In the foreground from left to right is Westminster City Councillor, Ann Mallinson who is launching the global EcoHealth Network by cutting through the ribbon of unsustainable consumption (made from an easter egg carton and scraps of paper), Professor John Guilliebaud, Dr Bret Hart, Dr Colin Butler, Professor Tony McMichael and Dr Nick Zafos.

Where medical doctors have recognised a problem they have sometimes been very shy in recommending what to do about it. For example, an article in last year's Journal of the American Medical Association^{iv} discussed the challenge of new infectious diseases from global change. But its principal recommendation was to establish a better surveillance system! Foundation co-convenor Dr Colin Butler felt this was analogous to someone on board the Titanic recommending a detailed documentary be made of the collision with the iceberg. "The iceberg is in sight. Not only do we have to use the new technology to save us - at the time of the Titanic it was the wireless, now it is the Internet - but we also have to contribute to turning the ship to safer waters."

At the launch, John Guilliebaud, Professor of Family Planning and Reproductive Health at UCL medical school held a bucket under the spout of the pump to illustrate his point that the world, being like a bucket, was overflowing. Rather than find another bucket it would make better sense to follow Snow's example and to stop pumping the handle.

Professor Tony McMichael, Professor of Epidemiology at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change endorsed the aims of the Global EcoHealth Network indicating that the launch represented the small beginning of what could become a major development.

He emphasised the importance of the name of the movement:

- Global - the only way for there to be an effective response to climate change is if there is global cooperation in devising strategies;
- Eco - the emphasis on ecology and linking this with the impact on health is important and has been neglected in the past;
- Network - a bringing together of like-minded individuals and organisations is vital if there is to be any chance of success.

The Aims of the Global EcoHealth Network

The network will draw together health and environmental organisations and individuals who share a common concern for human ecology. At its core the network will consist of a group of people who would be responsible for facilitating the larger network.

The Internet will be used to plan and implement actions to promote a public health response to the environmental threats to sustainable population health. This response will include a variety of highly visible and public strategies similar to those that have been developed to address more conventional threats to public health such as tobacco smoking and alcohol. The network will do this by pooling the knowledge, expertise and energy to derive answers to the following questions, modified from Professor John Last's adaptation of questions from Geoffrey Vickers^v.

- 1a. What are the types and extent of human-induced environmental problems that are threatening sustainable health?
- 1b. What is the prognosis for population health if current trends concerning population growth and Humankind's impact on the environment continues?
- 1c. What is the prognosis if current trends continue?
2. What are the causes of the problems?
3. What is the current capability to deal with the problems?
4. In what ways can the political will be generated to address the problems?

The analyses of these questions would inform the development of strategies which public health professionals and environmental groups could then implement.

A key action which will be derived from feedback generated by this website, and from GEHN's work with like-minded organisations and networks, will be to develop an International Charter for Sustainable Population Health. Ten global-level changes that would significantly help towards the promotion of ecological sustainability will become the focus of this charter.

The mission of the Global EcoHealth Network is, "To develop a global public health approach to promote

sustainable health and ecosystems in association with like-minded organisations and individuals.'

Bret Hart is the convenor, Rodney Vlasis and Colin Butler are co-convenors and Pat Mowbray and Eberhard Wenzel are members.

ⁱ McMichael, A J. (1993) *Planetary Overload: Global Environmental Change and the Health of the Human Species* Cambridge University Press. Cambridge.

ⁱⁱ Last, J (1993). *Global Change: A challenge for the medical profession*. *Annals RCPSC*, 26 (1), 13-16.

ⁱⁱⁱ Lalonde M. Address to the American Public Health Association, 1976, quoted by Hancock T. "Sustainability, Equity, Peace and the (Green) Politics of Health" (p37) in C. Chu and R. Simpson (*Eds) 1994 *Ecological Public Health: From Vision to Practice*, Brisbane: Institute of Applied Environmental Research, Griffith University Toronto: Centre for Health Promotion.

^{iv} Patz, JA, Epstein, PR, Burke TA, Balbus JM. *Global climate change and emerging infectious diseases*. *JAMA* 1996; 275:217-223.

^v According to Professor John Last, similar questions were posed in an essay by Geoffrey Vickers in 1958 entitled, "What sets the goals of public health?"

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The Editor welcomes contributions from Fellows and trainees of the Faculty both as formal signed articles of 1000 words or less, or as letters of 250 words or less. Please forward correspondence and contributions to:

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The deadline for material for the September issue is 5 September.

Letters to the Editor may be published unless requested otherwise.

The AEA at 10 Australasian Epidemiologist - Prize

Original Contributions are solicited for a prize to mark the tenth anniversary of the AEA. OUP has generously provided a copy of the three-volume *Oxford Textbook of Public Health*, third edition (1997), valued at \$650, as the prize.

Contributions may be published in *Australasian Epidemiologist*. They may take the form of original scientific reports, the consideration of methods, or any public health, policy or philosophical question that relates to epidemiology. The submitting member should be listed as first or sole author..

Papers that make reference to the development of epidemiology in Australasia during the past or coming decade are particularly encouraged.

Word limit: 2000 words (including references), plus a limited number of figures and tables.

Open to financial members of the AEA, but anyone may enter the competition provided that membership* of the Association is taken out at the time of entry. Four copies of the manuscript, together with a disk copy (preferably Word 6.0 for Windows) and evidence of membership of the AEA, must be received by 31 October 1997. Judges shall comprise the Editor, *Australasian Epidemiologist*, and two members of the AEA Council. The Council reserves the right not to make an award.

Send entries to:

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