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Climate Change and Mortality

Maccabee¹ makes the valid point that anthropogenic “global warming” does not seem to be true. Furthermore he argues, effectively, that a warmer climate may, in fact, be more healthful than a cold climate. He presents data indicating that winter death rates seem to be about seven times greater than those of summer. However, his statement that rising temperatures “would save millions of lives” is misleading. If vital statistics were analyzed, similar mortality rates and total deaths will occur irrespective of minuscule “climate changes.” Overall, no lives will be “saved,” and death will occur, much as it does now, as annual death rates will average out accordingly. Death may be postponed, but death will occur, at higher rates during times of any physiological stress, and this will have the greatest effect on the most vulnerable.

The author’s conclusion that “world leaders” should be discussing “adaptation and alleviation” of climate changes is naïve at best. Historically, “world leaders” have had a poor record of influencing much of human activity. Physicians and their organizations are not likely to “take the lead” in educating the public, for a number of reasons, including lack of time, opposition from government-influenced media, and the general public’s lack of basic science and historical knowledge.

This dearth in basic scientific knowledge can be readily seen in the areas of physics, biology and chemistry. For example, the “greenhouse” gas that has the highest concentration and greatest effect upon weather and temperature is water vapor, whereas the CO₂ percentage in ambient air is roughly 0.03%.² Photosynthesis continuously removes CO₂ from the air and incorporates it into carbohydrates, including cellulose. The anabolism of many invertebrates such as corals, mollusks, and zooplankton incorporates CO₂ from the air into carbonates. These biological cycles tend to balance or buffer the CO₂ concentration in the air, thereby preventing soaring increases in CO₂. It does seem reasonable to conclude that most of the causes of “climate change,” in both short and long-term perspectives, are outside the control of human actions. These include changes or cycles in the sun’s activity and

radiation, volcanism, and the effects of the precession of the earth’s axis.

The best recommendation is for a basic education and understanding of the natural sciences of physics, chemistry, and biology, as well as history to put the sciences into a human perspective and time frame. Unfortunately, these subjects do not seem to be emphasized any longer in American education.

John R. Carbon, D.O., M.S.

Torrington, Conn.

Author’s Reply. My statement that rising temperatures “would save millions of lives” is correct in the sense that we use the American language. If a medic stops bleeding from a major wound, or a physician removes a potentially fatal cancer, we say a “life was saved” even though we know that everyone does die eventually. In a technical sense, I could say that “warming would *prolong* millions of lives,” as well as increasing lifespan by preventing premature deaths from heart disease, stroke, or pneumonia.

World leaders and American politicians are currently discussing carbon taxes and cap-and-trade legislation. *That* is naïve. Adaptation and alleviation of climate change is *not* naïve. It is the duty of responsible health professionals, scientists, educators, and leaders in disaster preparedness, such as the readers of this journal.

Dr. Carbon doubts that “physicians and their organizations” can “take the lead” in educating the public. He apparently does not know or remember that an organization called Physicians for Social Responsibility took the lead in scaring the public about low-dose radiation risks, thus stopping the growth of nuclear power in the U.S.

I agree with the author that the state of science education in the U.S. is a tragedy.

Howard Maccabee, Ph.D., M.D.

Alamo, Calif.

¹ Maccabee H. Direct health effects of climate change: an overview. *J Am Phys Surg* 2010;15:38-41.

² Hieb M. Global warming: a closer look at the numbers. *Geocraft*, Jan 10, 2003. Available at: www.geocraft.com/WVFossils/greenhouse_data.html. Accessed Nov 9, 2010.