

Alberta Doctors' Digest

Growth and climate change

I'm surprised at our growing response to the challenge of climate change. Many have given up gas-fuelled vehicles for hybrid and electric cars, or have even made bicycles their preferred means of transport. Still others have given up carbon-intensive foodstuffs and meat substitutes are increasingly popular.

We know we're still dependent on hydrocarbons, perhaps nowhere more acutely than in our own province. Recalling our historic dependence on its bounty, we're chagrined that oil has become a dirty word – *verboden*. We're used to media stars and other zealots, who proclaim, after jet-fuelled travel to the oil sands, that oil is the new devil incarnate, that we must give it up completely and pronto. Seemingly overlooked are the legions of people who've relied on the industry to feed and clothe their families, and sustain their communities.

The stage is set for conflict and we need a plan.

Looking beyond our energy woes and our reflex responses, we're forced to acknowledge other things remain amiss in our lives. The economic woes of the financial debacle of 2008 shadow us still. Global financial pillars wobbled mightily – close to systemic failure – requiring governments to ante up billions, adding mountainous debt to balance sheets. The world was righted, to an extent, though little has changed, structurally or otherwise.

The debt wheel we're yoked to grinds on. We're more in thrall than ever to credit cards with usurious rates, home equity loans based on real estate froth, or payday loans possible with none-too-secure employment. Our economies remain circular. Businesses invest for profit, which should accrue to shareholders, and at least in part to workers. The products we consume so readily are novel, even tantalizing, but are ever more expensive. We're buying stuff we don't need, with money we don't have – our ages' attempt at perpetual motion.



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It's all based on economic growth and meant to bring prosperity, but which has delivered its benefits unevenly. One-fifth of the world's population earns just 2% of global income. As Bernie Sanders reminds us, the top 0.1% owns as much wealth as the bottom 90%. Up to one-fifth of American children live in poverty and middle class incomes have not kept pace. The old saw has it right: the rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

The professions – ours included – enjoy some immunity from this, and given our historic privilege, we're mollified by pay packets that are single-digit multiples of that of an average worker. The marauding behavior of top executives, with some hundred-fold multiples of base wages, gets little notice.

We're addicted to growth, nevertheless, even though we've had a diversity of warnings: the population concerns of Robert Malthus several centuries ago, the Club of Rome and its *Limits to Growth* publications, and the work of biologists Paul and Anne Ehrlich. They'd all agree we're in for hard times as our numbers pass seven billion, on the way to 10 or 11 billion later this century.

An ecologist named Garrett Hardin outlined the problem succinctly half a century ago. In *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Hardin restated concerns that began much earlier. Consider a resource, such as pasture land available to all: a "commons." It can be expected that each herdsman will try to use the land to their advantage, adding more animals to pasture as these become available. With time, the land will suffer at overuse and to the detriment of all.

This is contrary to the assertions of Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, that an individual will be led by an "invisible hand" to promote the public interest. Hardin pointed out the fallibility of perceived freedoms in a commons situation and the need for governance rules.

Regard our planet as a commons and the need for governance is obvious. Future or long term needs must not be undermined by short term, individual interests. Growth as we have known it involving our commons, our world, has become unsustainable due to our despoliation.

One of the possibilities that might improve our lot has been labeled "decoupling." If we can provide goods and services with, say, half our usual resource use, we're more efficient. This greater efficiency has been called "relative decoupling."

As attractive as more efficiency may be, it won't suffice, and we'd need half a dozen worlds to proceed without change. The data regarding our carbon-based assault on the environment tell us we're up against a wall. The two degrees centigrade rise in global temperatures that we thought would give us room to get our house in order is mostly gone. World economic activity has doubled over the last quarter century as CO₂ emissions continue to climb. We're going to need *absolute decoupling* of energy use from economic activity if we're to stay within ecological limits.

Tim Jackson, author of *Prosperity Without Growth*, contends that whole scale change is needed, both regarding our use of fossil fuels, as well as the pervasive capitalism that has diverted our attention from looming ecological misery. We don't need, Jackson argues, all the "stuff," that we consume and hoard so fervently. Once basic requirements for food and shelter are met, more won't make us happier. We're in search of a system that is more equable than we have known, but one more durable and more secure.

It may be easier to imagine the end of the world than the demise of capitalism, but we must contend with the public health wisdom of recent decades. We know, for instance, that income inequities make us anxious and reduce our trust in social systems, but the evidence for negative health outcomes across unequal populations is remarkable and even indisputable. Epidemiologists Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett in *The Spirit Level - Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, astonish us with the costs of inequality. Life expectancy, child welfare, and literacy all improve in more egalitarian societies. Infant mortality, obesity, teenage pregnancy, homicide rates and the incidence of mental illness all diminish, whereas maternal mortality, deaths from cardiac disease and survival rates from cancer all improve.

Addressing our ecological limits with social and economic rework could help not only our health but our chance of global survival.

There's talk about a "Green New Deal," which embraces some of these concepts. New but necessary roles for government include targeted public investment promoting energy security, low-carbon infrastructure and ecological protection. It is in fact about two things: fix the economic model and add in social recovery.

Whether we're on the right path or whether this is even remotely "doable" remains to be seen. The undertaking will require us to be our brothers and sisters' keepers, to get along, to care more for others than we've shown much aptitude in past. We know too that those who don't like the notion will disparage our efforts.

There are other possibilities. Perhaps we'll stumble onto non-carbon energy forms that are safe, accessible and cheap. Perhaps we – some of us – will muddle through climate change, avoiding the plunder, war and pestilence that may attend. We'll need luck writ large, though a decimated populace stands a better chance of survival in a depleted world.

I'd like to think this isn't happening, but I'd also like to collect Lamborghinis or Ferraris, "living large," as they say and beyond limits. I'd like to live extravagantly, but know it's not in the cards. I'm dreaming.

There's talk in recent years, of going to Mars, our moon again, or even Jupiter's moon, Europa. I recall philosopher, futurist and inventor Buckminster Fuller years ago: "We are not going to be able to operate our Spaceship Earth successfully nor for much longer unless we see it as a whole spaceship and our fate as common. It has to be everybody or nobody."

The nod goes to Bucky. I hope he was right.

References available upon request.

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