Blogs: Docs Talk

Your environment, your health by Dr. Warren Bell

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Why have I, a family physician from a small town in south central B.C., been given the honour of writing the inaugural "Docs Talk" column? And why are the David Suzuki Foundation and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) launching a feature like this?

I once heard some years ago that we humans share 70 per cent of our genome with earthworms. The notion that we share more than two-thirds of our genetic material with a small, soft creature that crawls just below the surface of the soil may be startling to some.

Startling or not, it confirms that we are intimately connected to other life forms on this planet.

Like the earthworm, we doctors often see only that which is directly in front of us. We tend to view the world of human health as critically important, and the world beyond human health concerns as, well, largely irrelevant. Our patients help to reinforce this notion, because they are quite focused on their own immediate health problems or those of the people they love. They even worry about the suffering of people they don't know personally, yet whose plight they witness in the media or on the Internet.

But often they, like most physicians, find it harder to become aroused about the experiences — especially the negative ones — of creatures that belong to other species. And the more different from humans these other species are, the more difficult it is to experience interconnectedness.

The journey of humankind can be seen as one of slowly and steadily expanding consciousness, both of ourselves and of the world that surrounds us. Part of that expansion of consciousness is broadening our awareness of how sensitive other life-forms are to our own behaviour.

We now know much about the intricate intelligence of dolphins, other primates, and certain birds, like the raven. But we have also learned that the organs and tissues of all living things, down to the smallest single-celled organisms, can be profoundly affected by chemicals we produce or by the physical changes we introduce on the Earth's surface.

Pesticides, solvents, cleaning agents, petrochemicals and flame retardants are just a tiny fraction of the tens of thousands of chemical substances we humans have created in our laboratories for our own purposes. Then after the fact, we have discovered that these substances can harm other creatures that are exposed to them.

And then there are medicines.

It has long been a cherished belief of the doctor that administering medicine to his or her patient is an unmitigated good. We now know that this is a simplistic point of view. Many pharmaceuticals — especially newly synthesized ones — wreak havoc on animals and plants exposed to them after they leave the human body. It is painful for me and my colleagues to learn that our efforts to do good can sometimes do very bad things.

But that's not all. It is quite clear that the healthcare "system" has, until recently, flown below the radar of environmental analysis. Consequently, the consumption of materials and energy within healthcare has often been disproportionately large and generally unquestioned. One study of hospital-based consumption showed that an astonishing eight pairs of latex gloves were used and thrown away per patient each day!**

But if there is one single fact that can no longer be ignored in the 21st century, it is that all living creatures — plants, animals, fish, birds, bacteria, viruses and

all the rest — are indissolubly interconnected. The physical environment in which we all live is the medium through which we are unified. We are bound together through air, water and land in one giant global ecosystem. And we all depend, one way or another, on the driving energy of the sun, which bathes our Earth in endless abundance.

So this leads to the far more important reasons why a small-town family physician would inaugurate "Docs Talk".

I am a primary-care practitioner. That means that anyone can walk in the door of my office or hospital and seek attention. I see people in their real-life circumstances. I know their bodies are interpenetrated with bacteria, viruses, fungi, parasites and chemicals from the environment around them. I see their ecosystem-bodies living in a human community of other ecosystem-bodies. I see that human community embedded in a local ecosystem.

And since those first photographs came back from the Apollo space missions, I am compelled to notice that all those local ecosystems run together into one gigantic planetary ecosystem.

So when I treat the patient in front of me, I am well aware that I am inevitably, and always, treating Planet Earth.

** [Germain, Susan (2002) "The ecological footprint of Lion's Gate Hospital" Hospital Quarterly 5(2): 61-6.]

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