
EDITORIAL

Whither Now?

“Science,” says Bryan Appleyard,¹ “has been more successful and effective than any other form of human knowledge. This has made it the primary determinant of our way of life and our attitudes to the world and other people”.

It, therefore, is the primary determinant of how and what we grew up with in our homes, experienced at school and university. It determines how we get our drinking water or drive to work.

It has a dominant influence on how we work with people as patients. Our political and bureaucratic systems are influenced by it. Science has permeated the Western World and is superseding or modifying local cultures all over the globe.

So where is this success and efficacy taking us? The Green movement is concerned, and rightly so, that it will take us to the final destruction of our planet. In medicine we already know that we are pushing the limits of what we can afford in human and financial terms. The world over, health care systems are trying to adjust as medical care becomes unaffordable. The changes in health legislation and managed health care systems are ways of addressing this.

Addressing the failures of science to contain its “efficacy” and power by further science is not going to help. Appleyard says, “This is dangerous because science itself has no morality or faith and can tell us nothing about the meaning, purpose and significance of our own lives.

Nevertheless, people are deluded into thinking that the technical effectiveness of science proves that it can provide all these things.”

He goes on to say, “science, more than anything else, has made us who we are; science is our faith and our age’s unique signature ... we must resist, and the time to do so in now.”

We are in a time of major change as a country. So is the world. We are likely to fail as clinicians, as organisers of health care systems and as citizens if we continue to believe and act as if every problem has a scientific solution.

Appleyard argues that science must be drawn back into culture, so that its worst abuse and most monstrous claims can be contained, rather than our being used and patronised by it.

A good place to start broadening our vision is to look carefully at our failures and the placebo effect. This may help us to understand the inherent limits of this science that is driving us.



Reference:

1. Appleyard, Bryan. *Understanding the Present. Science and the Soul of Modern Man*. London: Pan Books, 1993.