

An inconvenient truth

I first saw this movie in Toronto while attending the *XVI International AIDS Conference* and my immediate reaction was – well if there's no planet then we don't have to worry too much about AIDS. It kind of put things in perspective. Global warming may arguably be an even more pressing public health issue than the AIDS pandemic.

Before seeing this movie I was confused. Last summer I read a novel by Michael Crichton in which environmentalists were portrayed as terrorists keeping the planet in a state of fear and manipulating the facts to suit their case. Crichton weaves much "scientific fact" into his novel and leaves one in serious doubt about global warming. In contrast Al Gore presents the case for global warming clearly and convincingly builds up an undeniable mountain of evidence. Incidentally he reports on a study from *Science* reviewing a sample of 928 peer-reviewed articles and assessing how many disagree about the reality and cause of global warming - 0% - compared to articles in the popular press where 53% express doubt.

As a parent the movie engaged me because my children will face the escalating consequences of our inaction within their lifetime and as a medical practitioner because of the extreme effects on the health of populations. Admittedly the whole continent of Africa only contributes 2,5% to the emissions causing the problem, but will not be immune to the many consequences. Changes in weather conditions may cause both droughts and torrential rain, rising sea levels may flood low lying areas, warmer atmosphere will allow mosquitoes and malaria to extend to higher areas – such as Harare and Nairobi. The vulnerability and exposure of humans to vectors of disease may increase. Floods may displace 100,000 million people worldwide.

Those of us in family medicine are used to considering the systemic implications of illness. Cells, tissues, organs, families, societies and organizations share common characteristics as complex systems and these systems all interact with each other. The planet is one

more global system bounded not by a cell membrane, but the atmosphere. If the cell membrane fails to maintain the inner environment of the cell, the cell and maybe the organism will die. If the planet's atmosphere fails to maintain our environment...

Just now my mother-in-law is visiting us. She used to live in Tanzania and in 1946 at the age of 13 years climbed Kilimanjaro. She remembers walking over snow and glaciers, even without reaching the

summit. Two years ago I climbed Kilimanjaro where the glaciers are now like a monks tonsure around the crater rim. This is our African "canary in the coal mine" that warns us that all is not well. The day before the movie she had suggested buying a dishwasher machine to help us in the kitchen, the day after we decided to save the electricity and go for solar panels instead.

Bob Mash

