



Physicians and Environmental Change

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To the Editor: In his Commentary, Dr Auerbach¹ discussed the threat to human health posed by alleged increases in environmental disasters and urges physicians to become more environmentally aware. A recurrent theme is that environmental change is occurring rapidly, human activity is a primary cause, and most of the outcomes will be negative.

Climatologists are not uniform in their assessment of climate change.² Catastrophic global cooling and warming theories have alternated in popularity for over a century. In March 2008, the International Conference on Climate Change² challenged the purported consensus on human-induced climate change. This conference was attended by atmospheric and climate scientists who are skeptical that humans are the main driver of climate change. It also included scientists who believe that human-induced climate change is a reality but not a pressing problem for a variety of reasons.

It has been argued that global warming would contribute to an increased occurrence and spread of diseases once thought to be in retreat, such as malaria. However, global warming may not significantly increase the spread of malaria to new populations.³

It may not be true that all environmental effects are negative or will move inexorably in one direction. The occurrence of the El Niño phenomenon, sometimes considered to be a negative, may actually result in a net benefit to the US economy.⁴

Recent research has raised doubt about anthropogenic global warming.⁵ While this does not refute the idea that humans are affecting climate, it does demonstrate that the climate system is complex and that it is not understood well enough to predict the future reliably.

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In Reply: As Drs Lupo and Hagan observe, intelligent, dispassionate persons differ in their interpretations of data and opinions about certain aspects of global environmental conditions, including climate change. Issues of this magnitude should always be considered on the basis of scientific evidence and the most reasonable estimations as foundations for prediction. The unprecedented amount of discussion of these issues may lead to very important decisions by individuals, industry, governments, and society. As my Commentary indicated, I believe that physicians must accept responsibility for becoming educated on their own terms about environmental issues, so that they may become leaders on the medical aspects of these matters.

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