



# Canute: are we blindly ignoring the inevitable?

*“Who is to say that the current warming trend, whether a natural cycle or manmade, won’t also provide more benefit than harm? In any case it is a very gradual shift and we can deal with it in time if necessary,”* David, Houston, Texas USA. Contribution to a BBC website debate on the subject *“Does climate change pose a bigger threat to the planet than terrorism?”*



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James Willis has an abiding interest in the way technological changes impinge on human values. He was a committed GP, working in a small practice within a large, exceptionally well-equipped health centre. Since leaving practice he writes extensively and pursues an eclectic range of interests in science and the humanities. He is convinced that frontline general practice has something special to teach the world about making technology serve humanity

WE WILL ONLY know for sure if predictions of catastrophic climate change due to human activity are correct when the catastrophe happens. Even then, some people will go on arguing, as the sea drowns vast coastal areas around them, that it is all an amazing coincidence.

What I can’t understand is the vitriol that comes from the ecosceptic camp. Don’t they have grandchildren too? If someone flags down your car and tells you they think the road over the crest of the hill may be starting to subside into a quarry, the normal reaction is to be grateful. Or at least to slow down. Only a complete imbecile would step on the gas and shout invective about the human right to party. Of course the warning may be a hoax, or the person may be wrong, but the sensible thing is to take appropriate precautions.

The other thing I can’t understand about the ecosceptics is their certainty. In the midst of our society’s unprecedented dependence on technology and our official belief in rationality (exemplified for us doctors by evidence-based medicine), we are witnessing an explosion of irrationality among the public.

They simply do not understand the characteristics of reliable knowledge, and are absolutely hopeless when it comes to comparing the scale of hypothetical risks. They worry about tiny or manifestly non-existent dangers that are publicised by the media. They acquiesce with a stepwise outlawing of any activity that

carries the smallest degree of risk, so that diving boards have been removed from swimming pools across the world, and you are no longer supposed to fit a plug onto a household appliance.

Meanwhile when an international conference on preventing dangerous climate change reports that things are worse than previously thought, and that we are facing the greatest peril that has ever confronted mankind, people find any fatuous excuse to turn their heads away. They think the warnings are boring, predictable, exaggerated, not something that they can do anything about anyway. Notoriously, they cast around for anyone who can be called a scientist and who disagrees. This “expert” will be given a place on any discussion – ostensibly to “balance” it, but in effect to grossly distort it.

If we believe in preventive medicine nothing else touches this for importance. You can leave my sky-high cholesterol, you can let me smoke like a chimney, and you can let me tear about on my motorcycle. The thing to get serious about is CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and sustainability. There may not be points in this under the new GP contract, but now is the time to show your independence. There are no votes in it for politicians, so the public are going to have to lead them by the nose. And nobody leads the public better than their dear old GPs. If we showed our patients and our communities that we are serious about this we could make a crucial difference. We are scientists, and we are highly trained in recognising reliable knowledge. And part of the reliable knowledge in this case is that we still have time to avoid the worst-case scenario.

Sorry, I have to make a correction. I asked above “don’t they have grandchildren too?”. I should, of course, have said “children”. It’s all much more immediate than we hoped. ✚

