

Book reviews

MERCHANTS OF DOUBT — HOW A HANDFUL OF SCIENTISTS OBSCURED THE TRUTH ON ISSUES FROM TOBACCO SMOKE TO GLOBAL WARMING

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None of us wants to believe the truth about Climate Change. We are suckers for anyone who tells us with conviction that there isn't a problem and that nothing needs to be done. So a handful of mavericks, using the array of techniques described in this meticulously-researched book, have been able to delay remedial action on a range of crucial public health issues, sometimes for many decades, by the deliberate cultivation of our all-too-willing doubt about the soundness of the underlying science.

But the extraordinary thing is the way the same few people keep cropping up. These are the 'Merchants of Doubt'. One them happens to be the Fred Singer who was interviewed by Professor Sir Paul Nurse, President of the Royal Society, on the recent BBC2 Horizon programme, *Science Under Attack*, as a prize specimen of global warming denial.

Which he is. But what was not mentioned on the programme was that this is the same Fred Singer who campaigned for the tobacco industry in their denial of the adverse effects of environmental tobacco smoke; for the fossil fuel industry in their fight to deny that the burning of coal was the cause of acid rain; for the chemical industry in their battle to deny the existence of the ozone hole — and when that was proved, of its link to the release of CFCs. He was also the Fred Singer who undermined the message of Al Gore's film *An Inconvenient Truth* by creating the false impression that the Roger Revelle, Gore's mentor and inspiration, had changed his mind about global warming just before he died. That story alone is worth getting the book to read, and if it doesn't make you very angry, nothing will. There were others like him, the names Fred Sietz and William Nierenberg are

equally ubiquitous in the book, but one quote about Singer serves as an example of such people's access to power:

'Did all of Singer's efforts to discredit mainstream science matter? When asked in 1995 where he got his assessments of ozone depletion, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, probably the most powerful man in Congress at the time, said, "my assessment is from reading people like Fred Singer".'

(page 133)

Of course many people's reaction will be to reject the book piecemeal; often without reading it, like the notorious one-star reviewers of Amazon (the great majority of Amazon reviews are five-star). It is, on the face of it, a story of almost unbelievable wickedness, and our humanity revolts against the possibility of it being true. But it is a story told in careful, consistent detail, in calm and understated terms, by two historians of science. And it is backed up by 64 pages of references.

The next reaction will be to ask what can possibly motivate these 'merchants'. When they are in the pay of vested interests there is no mystery, but what, you may well ask, about global warming? Don't they live on Earth with the rest of us? Do none of them have grandchildren too? And here the book provides a very interesting and convincing answer.

Many of these people were physicists of the highest distinction during the Cold War. They share a passionate commitment to freedom, and are therefore fiercely antipathetic to regulation of any kind. They see all regulation as a route to socialism, and therefore communism, that perennial bogeyman of the American right. Devotees of the economic theories of Milton Friedman, they believe that capitalism is the only way to solve the world's problems, and they are passionately opposed to any science which demonstrates the inconvenient truth that capitalism contains no mechanism for protecting the environment. This explains why they are opposed to environmentalism *per se*, and repeat catch phrases like 'Green

trees with red roots' to one another. And when science conflicts with their ideology, they set out ruthlessly to undermine science itself. Often with unctuously hypocritical publications like *Bad Science: A Resource Book* of 1993, websites like www.JunkScience.com, or institutions like The Advancement of Sound Science Coalition (TASSC), whose links to the Philip Morris tobacco company were deliberately obscured.

I have a personal interest here, because a common thread in much of my own writing, indeed inherent in the title of my first book, *The Paradox of Progress*, is my passionate antipathy to excessive, intrusive, humanity-sapping regulation. But these 'Merchants of Doubt' are threatening to bring even moderates like me into disrepute. The truth is that I am also passionately committed to science; my father was secretary to the British Association for the Advancement of Science for heaven's sake; it is in my blood. And I don't try tricks like the one that was played on the University of East Anglia, not mentioned in the book, but which is still working its poison. The only real 'scandal' here was the way this manufactured smear was reported around the world in such absurdly inflated terms — James Delingpole's *Spectator* article calling it 'the greatest scientific scandal in the history of the world'¹ being not atypical — and the way the subsequent multiple exonerations of the Climate Research Unit have been hardly reported at all, and have made so little impact on the public consciousness. Indeed James Delingpole was still using the ridiculously inappropriate term 'Climategate' on the recent *Horizon* programme referred to previously, and clearly still hasn't twigged the extent to which he was duped.

As Aaron Sorkin said recently, 'Nothing is more important to democracy than a well-informed electorate'.² It is a curious paradox that just when electorates have unprecedented access to information they also have unprecedented power to select the information they listen to. The world is dividing into enclaves which talk only within themselves and in that environment the most extreme ignorance can feed upon

itself and thrive.

The importance of this book can hardly be exaggerated. Its complex story is told with the pace of a thriller. I never read the *Da Vinci Code* and I'm not going to bother now, because this is the real thing, The vitally important thing, and for once it is no exaggeration to say that, is that we all learn the techniques of the professional deniers that this book exposes, so that we can recognise them when we see them, and guard ourselves, our society, and our world, from their malign power.

James Willis

REFERENCES

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2. The Today Programme. BBC Radio 4 programme. 21 Jan 2011.

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TOWARDS THE EMANCIPATION OF PATIENTS CHARLOTTE WILLIAMSON

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British general practice, it seems to me, has a regrettable tendency to self-congratulation and self-importance. We never tire of churning out the overworn description of our profession as 'the jewel in the crown' of the NHS; we celebrate our patient-centredness and boast of our humility; we speak proudly of our judicious gatekeeping skills and our tireless advocacy on behalf of our patients — and now some of us at least are trumpeting the new dawn when at last we shall take centre stage in controlling how the bulk of the NHS budget is spent. Because, it goes almost without saying, 'We know best'. But do we? With the nGMS contract we have taken the devil's shilling in the form of the Quality and Outcomes Framework that has led to over-medicalisation, overtreatment, computer-centredness and the sacrifice of personalised medicine for public health tasks, and we have opted out of out-of-hours care. NHS patients from overseas are astonished that they are unable to see a specialist without the initial approval of their GP and wonder at our parochial

outlook. And the public remains sceptical of our motives, and capabilities, when it comes to commissioning care on their behalf.

Charlotte Williamson's book makes little mention of general practice, but her main thesis is of relevance to the foregoing. She maintains that patients remain oppressed, and their interests repressed, by both health professionals and by what she calls 'corporate rationalisers' (managers, commissioners, and health economists), and that there is a long way to go before they can be regarded as emancipated. In her analysis, the interests of clinicians remain dominant, and those of patients remain repressed, while the corporate rationalisers have a somewhat ambivalent role, sometimes mediating between the other two parties, sometimes challenging one and supporting the other, while of course having interests of their own which may or may not be in conflict with those of the other groups.

While speaking at times of 'the patient movement' in broad terms, the author is at pains to point out the contrast between radical and non-radical patient activists: the former are ready to challenge the interests, values and behaviours of health professionals, while the latter, as typified perhaps in many primary care Patient Participation Groups, tend to be more supportive. As with any emancipation movement, it is the radicals that tend to bring about significant change.

As examples of radical movements, the Association for Improvements in Maternity Services (AIMS), The National Association for Welfare of Children in Hospital (NAWCH — now Action for Sick Children) and several other groups are put under the spotlight, and their origins, activities, membership, methods and achievements explored. It is sobering to read that it took almost 30 years of campaigning for unrestricted visiting to become universal in paediatric wards; and while such pointless practices as pudendal shaving and pre-labour enemas were quite soon abandoned under pressure from groups such as AIMS (and sympathetic professionals, to be sure), there is still plenty of scope for improving the choice and quality of experience on offer to those undergoing childbirth.

The author identifies what she calls 'the ten core principles that patient activists believe should guide healthcare': respect,

equity, access, information, safety, choice, shared decision making, support, representation and redress. Perhaps these should be saved as an *aide-memoire* screensaver on all commissioners' laptops.

Other chapters explore conflicts and schisms within the patient movement, *inter alia* demonstrating how widely the now-disbanded Community Health Councils were distributed along the radical-conservative spectrum; allies and antagonists among health professionals (Sir Donald Irvine is described as a 'well-known radical doctor', along with Mrs Wendy Savage); and achievements and failures of the movement. In conclusion is a plea that justice and equality — of moral agency, of voice, and of respect and esteem — should be made more explicit principles of the patient movement, and that recognising it as an 'emancipation movement' might be of value in itself and lead towards our shared aim of improving the quality of care in the NHS.

Dr Williamson, with a background in both natural and social sciences and as vice-chair of York Health Authority and Trust, writes with the assurance and authority of someone with both academic and practical experience, and the book is tightly argued, scholarly and clearly written. I found it stimulating, and it has made me think again about my own comfortable assumptions about my own concerns for patients' interests. I remain unconvinced that there really is a coherent 'patient movement' rather than a large number of patient interest groups of varying degrees of inclusivity and efficacy. I would like to have seen some acknowledgement that at least some of the profession's mistrust of patient activists stems from the dubious activities of certain radical groups with particular axes to grind (JABS and its involvement with Dr Andrew Wakefield springs to mind).

Essentially this book is one of theoretical analysis rather than a primer on the practicalities of patient involvement, but I would strongly recommend it to anyone who is contemplating even a part-time career in GP commissioning: it may just remind those doctors who think that they know what's best for their patients to check with the latter first.

Dougal Jeffries

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