

Offline: Medicine's theory of relativity

The "Patient Earth" is a powerful and compelling idea. One might indeed see the Earth and its complex systems as sick and in need of care. But one might also see the Earth as being patient in a different sense—that of waiting, tolerantly, for the human species to realise the harm it was doing to the planet. The notion of the "Patient Earth" was marked in Oslo last month by the Per Fugelli lectures, dedicated to the man who first used the phrase in his 1993 paper, "In search of a global social medicine" (*Forum for Development Studies*, 1993; 1: 101–08). Fugelli is a general practitioner who is best known today for his book, *Death, Shall We Dance?* (2010), which won Norway's Freedom of Expression Prize in 2013. There, he wrote about his experiences of living with metastatic cancer. In the words of the Fritt Ord Foundation, which awarded him the prize, "With wisdom and generosity, he has drawn attention to our fears of talking about death and how we repress such thoughts." As Fugelli puts it: "Today's society needs to release death from the prison of banned words." But Fugelli also deserves our gratitude because he was one of the first doctors to illuminate medicine's role in addressing planetary threats to human health.

*

Fugelli's argument is this: the "consumption trap" we have created is jeopardising "the prognosis of the patient Earth", and, most importantly in 2015, "medical doctors are mainly absent" from this debate. "Global environmental change will cause illness on a massive scale." "A dismal future is not preordained." "To prevent an eco-catastrophe, we must shift the unit of concern and commitment from me to us, from nation to planet, from now to future." "The patient Earth calls for the doctor, but nobody answers. Hitherto medicine has not responded to the ecological challenge." "A global social medicine requires a radical shift in the ethical and cultural foundations of modern, western medicine." "The medical tradition of combining realism with hope can counteract the apathy created by the prophets of doom." "It is, therefore, essential, to call upon doctors to give a world diagnosis and help with the treatment." In his later writings, Fugelli warned about the "zero-vision" of modern public health—"an obsessive preoccupation with risk". "The bright sides of life", he wrote in 2006, "are transformed into warning triangles by the modern princes

of darkness: researchers, public health professionals, and journalists." Medicine and public health oversell certainty, promising and demanding too much. "The modern public health project curses life." "Health is not biology alone, health is also dreams and emotions." And with this interpretation of medicine, Fugelli set out his own personal theory of relativity:

$$H=B \times (C + P)^{t,p}$$

Where, *H* is health; *B*, biology; *C*, culture; *P*, politics; *t*, time; and *p*, place. Fugelli writes: "Current public health education is double blinded for cultural and political impacts on health. It focuses monomaniacally on factor *B*—biological, chemical, and physical hazards to our health...man must be reconciled with risk, failures, malfunction, and non-perfection."

*

Anthony Costello, who led *The Lancet's* 2009 Commission on Climate Change, gave one of the Fugelli lectures, arguing that medicine's history is one of an ever narrower vision for health. He countered that trend by emphasising the importance of communities for planetary health—their role in sharing knowledge, giving social support, enabling better decision making, and mobilising political advocacy. Communities are powerful instruments in their own right for improving health. Costello's work, in a remarkable sequence of randomised trials, has shown that community engagement can reduce maternal and newborn mortality by a third and a half, respectively. Camilla Stoltenberg, Director of the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, replied by pointing to the unprecedented challenge that Fugelli's diagnosis presented to our civilisation. And Thomas Eriksen, an anthropologist, emphasised the importance of "cognitive revolutions" to transform our values in, and expectations of, society. Fugelli concluded his eponymous lectures by inviting his audience to pursue "curiosity forever". "Let's stick to our intentions", he said, "and not be obsessed by results". Doctors may never find a definitive solution to the perils facing our planet but, as "engaged citizens", we have a duty to continue our search for a global social medicine.

Richard Horton
richard.horton@lancet.com



Richard Horton



Richard Horton



Richard Horton