

Transcript Details

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Medical Hazards of the Nuclear Age

Our presidential election is only days away, 48 million people in America are uninsured and healthcare costs are rising two to three times faster than our nation's GDP. Where will America's healthcare system be in five years? Welcome to ReachMD's monthly series focus on public health policy. This month we explore the many questions facing healthcare today.

You are listening to ReachMD XM Channel 157, the channel for medical professionals. Welcome to the Clinician's Roundtable. I am Dr. Maurice Pickard, your host and with me today is Dr. Helen Caldicott. Dr. Caldicott is a pediatrician and shall be speaking to us from Sydney, Australia. She is also the founder of Women's Action for Nuclear Disarmament and the founder and first president of Physicians for Social Responsibility.

Dr. PICKARD:

Thank you very much for joining us today.

Dr. CALDICOTT:

That's a pleasure.

Dr. PICKARD:

If I can paraphrase one of your books, we will be discussing what can be done if you love this planet. If I can start out, Dr. Caldicott, what prompted you to become an activist after being so involved in pediatrics and especially with an interest in cystic fibrosis?

Dr. CALDICOTT:

Well, several things, one when I was about 14, I read a book called On The Beach by Nevil Shute, an Australian author about the nuclear war that occurred by accident in the northern hemisphere and everyone was annihilated in the world except people in Melbourne in Australia because we live so far off and gradually the fallout came down to us and everyone eventually died of acute radiation sickness, and although it was not possible to destroy life on earth at that time it soon became possible. So my soul was branded in a way when I was quite young. I then entered medical school aged 17. I took <____>. I learnt about the Muller experiments with Drosophila radiation Drosophila and the mutations that occurred because of the radiation that were passed on generation to

generation and at that time in 1956 Russia, America, and China were testing weapons in the atmosphere and there was a very high fallout, and as a young medical student, I couldn't understand why the military in those countries were radiating the population when we had scientific evidence that radiation induced mutations in genetic disease and cancer. I tried to do some things at University when I was a student, but no one listened. I then came to live in America from 1966 to 1969. I had a part-time job in the Cystic Fibrosis Clinic at Harvard then, but I watched an extraordinary situation in a democracy in action, civil rights movements and Vietnam war movements; Martin Luther King and Kennedy both killed and Nixon was elected and I think those years radicalized me and showed me how a democracy can be used to good advantage, and then when I came back to Australia in 1969, I found out the French violating international law were also testing weapons in the atmosphere in the southern hemisphere and we got a lot of fallout in Adelaide where I lived in the city and so I wrote a letter to the paper and that started the whole thing. So in truth, I was sort of prepared for this just by living my life in a nuclear age and I became active politically, I guess, practicing preventive medicine because all preventive medicine is an action through the political process.

Dr. PICKARD:

I also remember the imagery of *On the Beach* without telling your age or my age, I also grew up with that movie and remember Gregory Peck and Ava Gardner after the movie dancing to *Waltzing Matilda* for a long-long time and I think that movie also impressed me much the way it did you. Being a physician, do you think a physician has an added responsibility? There are so few physicians who have a voice. Do you think that they have an added place or a special place in our community to be advocates for such issues?

Dr. CALDICOTT:

Absolutely. As I go around giving lectures and really educating people about the medical implications of nuclear war and nuclear power, most people have no idea what it means, but physicians do, for instance, I gave <____> at my alma mater, Children's Hospital at Harvard, and many of the people <____> and the like were there that I used to work with, so that's been about 70 or 80 physicians. They were not absolutely flabbergasted at the <____> produced about the nuclear power. Physicians are the best audience I ever get. They understand it immediately, and because we understand it, we can't just stay in our consulting rooms and our labs pretending the rest of the world doesn't exist for nuclear war which could still occur tonight, Cold War is not over, the weapons are still there ready to go, would induce the final epidemic of the human race and to ignore that is to the detriment of all of that patience and so we have to deal with both the micro and the macros, so that is our responsibility.

Dr. PICKARD:

I was impressed when I read your book *If You Love This Planet*, how you compared the planet to a patient, that they have symptoms, they have disease, they have etiology. Did you have this in mind when you wrote the book?

Dr. CALDICOTT:

I think I just probably thought of it in one of my speeches and realized that the planet is a living organism and that the ozone layer is the integument that the troposphere is the temperature control mechanism which is now being damaged by CO2 and global warming gases, that the circulatory system are the rivers, lakes and the oceans, that the skeleton is <____>, that the lungs are the trees which inspire CO2 and expire oxygen and it all seemed to fit perfectly with what I learnt as a physician, all these systems interdigitate.

Dr. PICKARD:

And then I was intrigued by the cure and at least that I took away from the book was cure for our planet was voting. Could you respond to that?

Dr. CALDICOTT:

Well, not just voting, choosing a democracy is people think they got once in every 4 years or so <____>. If you live in a democracy, you have a huge moral obligation to use this and not to use this means that you should not live in a democracy. I believe now in Australia where our election is coming up two weeks time, we have to vote, #1, voting is compulsory or will get fined 100 dollars; #2, as I had just stated voting isn't enough and I think what your wonderful president Jefferson once stated the whole truth an informed democracy will behave in a responsible fashion and it is up to us to inform ourselves, then get out and use this democracy. Otherwise, it is taken us rather cooperation to do the polluting with carcinogenic substances and like the weapons that destroy hundreds of thousands or indeed millions of people, I just think we have an extraordinary moral obligation as physicians to use democracy and to be the leaders.

Dr. PICKARD:

I also know that you entered the political arena yourself, so you have carried this step further. I think you ran for office in South Wales, what prompted that?

Dr. CALDICOTT:

Yeah! It's New South Wales actually. I moved to live in a glorious little place called Byron Bay in 1991 and our elections were only 3 weeks long. The elections had just been announced, a man from the local newspaper Jan came in and <____> and said you should run, I said no way. He talked me into it by saying you can't just leave Gorbachev standing <____>, shouldn't you help him with the <____> during the Cold War and the like and my conscience was pricked and I did run. It was a wild and exciting campaign of 3 weeks and I missed by 600 votes out of 70,000. I would have been the first independent politician in the lower house, in the House of Representatives ever to have been elected in Australia. However, I didn't make it.

Dr. PICKARD:

You mentioned Gorbachev and you said the Cold War isn't over and I think back to Dwight Eisenhower in 1953 had a speech "Atom for Peace" and it was in our country and I am sure in the world it was the first introduction of shifting nuclear energy from the military sector into the what is become known as the private sector and then there was an agency, Atomic Energy Agency set up. Do you think to that time as an ...

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