

EDITOR'S PAGE



Make the World Great Again

Clean it Up!



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Today it is 70 degrees in Boston. Last week, when I went to the cardiac resynchronization therapy meeting in Washington, it felt like spring in mid-February. What is going on? The answers were provided by the keynote speaker Ron Waksman had booked for the meeting. Ron is on a roll, enlisting guest speakers the likes of Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, Colin Powell, and Mitt Romney as recent featured attractions. All of these were interesting and entertaining. Some provided insight, and Ron's fireside chat format makes him, in my view, a candidate for a late-night TV show host slot. This year's speaker was also entertaining and interesting, but also terrifying. Al Gore presented the case for the planet: why it is in deep trouble and why we are responsible. Ron asked him the pivotal question that seems to divide people. The question no longer is whether there is climate change but whether human activity is responsible. The facts Gore presented are perhaps not surprising for those who have paid attention, but they were nonetheless startling. The year 2015 was the hottest on record, only to lose that title to 2016. Now, this month without winter in the eastern United States may set all-time records. The causes, including carbon dioxide levels that have far exceeded any in history that were not associated with a disappearance of the polar ice caps, portend temperature rises that have made many coastal cities around the world start developing plans for coping with the flood to come. Noah, it's time to start building the ark!

Al Gore posed the 3 questions that must be answered: First, do we need to change? The scientific facts and the examples of catastrophic events of flooding and droughts are convincing to many. Of course, there are "alternative facts," but those of us

in medicine have, I hope, been interested in the reproduced evidence to inform our opinions. The second question was, Can we change? Here the gloom began to clear a bit. The rapid technological advances in power generation that could dramatically reduce the millions of tons of pollutants we release into our thin and fragile atmosphere, and the resilient but not inexhaustible oceans, are impressive. Wind energy alone could do much of the job, and solar power has the potential to transform our energy industry. What about all those lost jobs pumping and refining oil? Are we not about to reopen all the coal mines? The job creation in clean energy production and technological maintenance and repair is apparently huge, and we are unlikely to return to smokestack America. The third question Gore posed was, Will we change? This one is, of course, a very hard one given our short-term political eyesight. I do not hear politicians campaigning on the platform that they will clean up the planet so that our great-grandchildren can enjoy life. No, what I hear is that we will remove environmental regulations so that there will be fewer restrictions on drilling, coal mining, and deforestation. We also are told that energy efficiency and incentives for developing clean energy solutions are just government giveaways, and these must be deconstructed. Yes, economic growth is important and necessary if we are to pay for all the things promised, but the cost of a degraded planet is astronomical.

What do such concerns have to do with cardiology? Why was Al Gore preaching to a congregation of cardiologists and industry partners committed to health promotion? I do not know Ron's reason for picking him, but the audience, with diverse political affiliations, seemed to get it. This must not be a

partisan issue, lest we fail to act in time. If the enemy were attacking Pearl Harbor, maybe we could get organized, even now, to react. This threat, however, is gradual by our political terms, and when Miami is underwater, maybe Orlando will still be dry. No, this should not be treated as a political issue but as a medical issue. Human health and existence are dependent on an environment that will sustain humanity. Although technology has contributed mightily to the problems, it also offers opportunities to mitigate the damage. The industrial revolution that was powered by fossil fuels was accompanied by the

most dramatic changes in human history. The information technology revolution holds the ability to enable big data and big thinking to address the problems. Will we change? Let's hope so. Thanks, Ron, for bringing to us this medical issue. Our planet is getting sick. Let's not wait until she is on life support.

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