

Science Denial is Not Free

Part 3 of a 3-part Series

Tobacco

Everyone knows of the campaign of denial by Big Tobacco, one of whose executives indicted his own industry by writing, "Doubt is our product since it is the best means of competing with the 'body of fact' that exists in the mind of the general public." It is a rare American who has not lost a friend or family member to smoking.

A report from the Union of Concerned Scientists summarizes the campaign of deceit by the tobacco companies:

They sought to manufacture uncertainty by raising doubts about even the most indisputable scientific evidence showing their products to be hazardous to human health. [Science deniers of every stripe typically demand absolute proof before action.]

They pioneered a strategy of "information laundering" in which they used—and even covertly established—seemingly independent front organizations to make the industry's own case and confuse the public.

They promoted scientific spokespeople and invested in scientific research in an attempt to lend legitimacy to their public relations efforts.

They attempted to recast the debate by charging that the wholly legitimate health concerns raised about smoking were not based upon "sound science."

Finally, they cultivated close ties with government officials and members of Congress. While many corporations and institutions seek access to government, Tobacco's size and power gave it enormous leverage.

In 1994, at a hearing held by Rep. Henry Waxman (D-CA), the CEOs of the seven Big Tobacco companies each raised his hand and testified under oath that he did not believe that cigarettes were addictive.

Even though the science that links smoking to lung cancer and other diseases has been unequivocal for decades, people continue to smoke and Big Tobacco continues to make big profits around the world. The World Health Organization estimates that during the 20th century, smoking killed 100 million people. During the 21st, it will kill an estimated one billion.

AIDS Denial

When I began writing *The Inquisition of Climate Science* I did not know that there was a parallel movement which denies that HIV causes AIDS. The type example of the consequences of AIDS denial is South Africa. The 2007 AIDS report of the UN estimated that 5,700,000 South Africans, nearly 12% of the population, had HIV/AIDS. That year, some 350,000 died of the

disease. As recently as 2004, only 4% of South Africans received anti-retroviral treatment. These facts did not come about by accident, but because of a deliberate policy of state-sponsored, indeed, state-required, science denial.

President Nelson Mandela delegated national AIDS policy to his deputy, Thabo Mbeki, who in 1999 became the second freely elected president of the country. Mbeki was re-elected and served until 2008. According to Seth Kalichman's book *Denying AIDS*, in 1999 President Mbeki received a large volume of AIDS-denialist material from a journalist and a lawyer, leading him to question the link between HIV and AIDS. He then furthered his education by turning to the Internet, where as we know one can find support for any position. Trusting his own intellect, Mbeki came to believe that dissident views on the cause of AIDS had been censored and that there deserved to be a debate about whether HIV was the culprit. (This demand for "equal time" or "fair and balanced" treatment is a characteristic of every denier group.) Mbeki appointed an AIDS-advisory panel, nearly half of whom were prominent AIDS denialists. In that same year, Mbeki used his opening address at the International AIDS Congress in Durban to declare poverty as the greatest threat to South Africa, virtually ignoring AIDS, the subject of the conference. He subsequently decided to withdraw from public discussion of AIDS, leaving policy and practice to his health minister, Dr. Manto Tshabalala-Msimang, an AIDS denier who recommended garlic, olive oil, and lemon as the most effective treatment and who said, "In my heart I believe it is not right to hand them [AZT and other anti-retroviral drugs] out to my people."

Public health researchers estimate that AIDS denialism in South Africa during the reign of Mbeki caused an additional 330,000 to 340,000 deaths, along with 171,000 other HIV infections and 35,000 infant HIV infections. As one person put it, South Africa practiced "genocide by sloth."

In 2008, on his first day in office, Mbeki's successor fired Tshabalala-Msimang. Barbara Hogan, her replacement, expressed South Africa's shame and said, "The era of denialism is over completely in South Africa."

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Science denial and pseudoscience are not free. We embrace them at someone's peril, often our children's. But global warming has the potential to do more harm than any case of science denial in history. Already hundreds of millions of people die annually from drought, famine, refugee migration, storms, heatwaves, respiratory diseases, malaria, and so on. If the worst-case trajectory of global warming projected by scientists comes true, and that is the trajectory we continue on, it is not hard to imagine that those numbers could rise ten-fold, into the billions. And once the emitted CO₂ is in the atmosphere and the oceans, it remains there for hundreds of years. Thus no one can say how long global warming, once begun in earnest, might last—but one thing is certain: it will not be over in 2100, the nominal target date of most projections. We are talking about nothing less than the reshaping of the coastlines of the planet and of human life on it, at an incalculable cost in both the quality and the quantity of life on earth, and for an unknown length of time with unknown consequences. If we could lower the risk, and we can, why would we take that chance?