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Editorial

Français à la page suivante

Ecosystem evasion and health

On July 10 an avalanche of garbage slid onto a shanty town built on the edge of a mountainous waste dump in Manila. After a 3-day rescue effort — hampered by noxious fumes, slippery footholds and putrid sludge — 137 bodies were recovered while an estimated 150–700 people remained buried.¹ Many of the buried were children fated to mine the waste land for precious bits of plastic, Styrofoam and aluminium. In the wake of the tragedy, the Manilan government announced that this dump would be closed and replaced by a sanitary landfill.

“Solid waste” and “sanitary landfills” (later converted to “golf courses”²) are the comforting misnomers we apply to the quagmires of waste that are accumulating on the outskirts of our cities. We coat their surfaces with placating greens and tee off on glorious mornings conveniently unaware of the wasted, polluting resources buried beneath and of the damage we inflict on the ecosystems that support us.

In 1962, in her enduring book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson called us on this: “We are accustomed to look for the gross and immediate effect and to ignore all else. Unless this appears promptly and in such obvious form that it cannot be ignored, we deny the existence of hazard.”³ Four decades later the disruption of ecological systems is proceeding unabashed: carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere is 30% higher than it was a century ago, species loss accelerates and half the land surface of the Earth has been altered, and we could go on.

Partly this is denial. It is also ignorance. The science of ecologists, envi-

ronmentalists, biogeochemists, engineers, etc., is dense, often impenetrable and published in obscure journals. And yet, humans are having an extraordinary impact on the earth's ecological systems. We need to understand these effects because of “the intimate connections between these systems and human health, the economy, social justice, and national security.”⁵

About a year ago Dr. Michael McCally of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine in New York interrupted these ruminations with the idea of publishing a series of papers to make the connection between those global environmental changes and human health. He and his co-authors, aware of the health threats posed by human domination of the planet, have summarized much of this complex material in an accessible format. In this issue we launch the series (see pages 533 and 551).

Our collective shortsightedness is a very real threat to the continuation of *Homo sapiens* and other species. Sapience (wisdom) begins with knowledge, applied judiciously. Can we demonstrate sapience as our evolutionary advantage, or are we simply talking about yet another comforting misnomer? — *CMAJ*

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