

State of Fear of Carcinogens

By ACSH Staff — January 27, 2005

The Washington Times ^[1] was among those picking up the UPI review by ACSH president, Dr. Elizabeth Whelan, of Michael Crichton's *State of Fear*.

New York, NY, Jan. 26 (UPI) -- The master of techno-suspense, Michael Crichton, has a new thriller heading for the top of the best-seller lists. In "State of Fear," Crichton -- a Harvard Medical School graduate -- confronts the conventional wisdom that the Earth is becoming dangerously warm, causing dire environmental and health consequences (flooding, agricultural destruction, disease, and more) that will only get worse unless the villain (U.S. industry, with its nasty habit of burning fossil fuels) is brought to its knees and held accountable.

Crichton's storyline portrays those working in the alleged public interest by protesting global warming as clinging to unproven scientific hypotheses, demanding action to solve a crisis that may not exist.

Readers quickly become aware that his fictional characters support a political and ideological cause rather than a scientific one. In the course of his novel -- and the accompanying non-fiction author's notes -- Crichton skewers those who hyperbolize about the risks of global warming and attribute its root causes to irresponsible actions of profit-hungry corporations. He targets the narrow-mindedness and stubbornness of radical environmentalists, their unwillingness to examine data that conflicts with their agenda. He zaps those advocates who dismiss their critics -- not by addressing the points of scientific debate -- but by claiming that each and every critic is an industry stooge.

In a particularly insightful exchange, Crichton presents an attorney who rejects any studies skeptical of global warming as being "supported by the coal industry." The attorney is challenged by the book's scientific hero, who notes that the lawyer himself represents environmental groups and thus could just as easily be characterized as a stooge and spokesman for a well-funded cause.

Crichton's book focuses on the lack of scientific merit for the hypothesis that rapid industrialization has caused a warming of the Earth. But his theme -- the politicization and misuse of science -- applies to a broad range of other junk science issues.

Indeed, "State of Fear" could have focused on the radical environmentalists' campaign to terrorize people about carcinogens -- defined as chemicals that cause cancer when fed in high doses to laboratory animals.

Like the mantra burning fossil fuels causes life-threatening global warming, the claim that a chemical that causes cancer in high doses in lab animals must be assumed to cause cancer even at low dose in humans is the gospel of today's self-appointed consumer and environmental groups (and their allies in the media and regulatory agencies).

The "rodent as little man" premise has caused countless cancer scares -- from the great cranberry scare of 1959 to the scares over cyclamate (1969), saccharin (1977), Alar (1989) and acrylamide (2002), just to mention a few. It has also spawned extraordinarily expensive laws, regulations, and product labeling, ostensibly to protect consumers from chemicals that cause cancer in rodents.

But -- much as Crichton argues relative to global warming and its alleged causes -- the emperor has no clothes when it comes to using animal tests to predict human cancer risk. There is absolutely no justification for assuming that a chemical that causes cancer in a rodent must therefore be assumed to cause cancer in humans. Indeed, the findings of cancer tests on mice cannot reliably predict cancer in rats, much less humans.

Crichton pored over years of climate data when he wrote his latest book, only to conclude that -- if global warming exists -- the claim that industrialization caused it is another naked emperor.

A memo to MC: please consider focusing your next novel on the sham of animal cancer testing to predict human cancer risk. The arguments against assuming a mouse is a little man are compelling:

-- An impressive percentage of everyday natural foods (mushrooms, peanuts, coffee, spices, and more) contain chemicals that cause cancer in animals, but trace levels of animal carcinogens -- whether from natural or synthetic sources -- are everywhere and pose no apparent harm to us.

-- The high doses used in animal cancer tests are themselves enough to cause malignancies, overshadowing whatever the effect of the specific chemical being tested might be.

-- The doses used in animal cancer tests are totally unrelated to human exposures to those chemicals. For example, the amount of saccharin a consumer might ingest is worlds apart from the huge, near-lethal amounts fed to rodents.

-- There is no evidence from human studies that animal carcinogens like saccharin, cyclamates, acrylamide and the other carcinogens in the news cause cancer in people. Indeed, with respect to the artificial sweeteners, there is evidence from studies of diabetics -- who use lots of sugar substitutes -- that they do not cause an increased frequency of cancer.

-- Terrorizing consumers about the animal carcinogen du jour has the unintended consequence of distracting us from the real, preventable causes of human cancer, including cigarette smoking and overexposure to sunlight.

"State of Fear" is about the myths of climate change, but hopefully it will spur consumer skepticism about the other myriad scares we confront today, putting the spotlight on contemporary, real-life advocates who, like the characters in this techno-thriller, twist and distort scientific facts to achieve their ideological goals -- ones primarily characterized by an antipathy toward industry.

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