

ENVIRONMENTAL HYPOCHONDRIA: A CONDITION WARRANTING PROFESSIONAL TREATMENT

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Imagine that you are a doctor who has been consulted by a patient who is convinced that he is suffering from a serious disease which he learnt about from a television documentary the previous week. Having looked after this patient for many years, you know from his past medical history, his current condition and his home and work situation that the likelihood of him contracting this disease is minimal. As a professional medical practitioner, what would you do?

You could dismiss his concerns with a cursory explanation, which is unlikely to be a satisfactory outcome from the viewpoint of the patient, who may then try to seek another more sympathetic doctor. You could give in to his concerns and embark on a prolonged or expensive series of investigations which you feel is quite unnecessary. You could refer him to a specialist for a more authoritative opinion, but you know that the specialist would give you no thanks being diverted from more critical cases. Or you could prolong the consultation in order to explain from first principles why he is most unlikely to have the disease, knowing that this will disrupt your schedule for the day, causing inconvenience to other patients.

The health profession has many parallels with the environmental profession, the main distinction being that medical practitioners take care of people's internal workings while environmental practitioners look after their external environment. Just as hypochondria is a situation which faces medical practitioners, particularly at the general level, so many environmental practitioners have to deal with a condition which I would describe as *environmental hypochondria*.

People who suffer from environmental hypochondria imagine that the adverse effects of developments or decisions are much worse than can be demonstrated by logical analysis of the real-world situation, or who are worried about non-existent impacts for no sound reason.

As a general environmental practitioner, I have encountered many environmental hypochondriacs over the years, most of whom fall into one of the following categories:

1. Clients, generally promoting major projects, who have a limited appreciation of environmental issues, are concerned about threats to the project caused by bureaucratic delays or legal challenges, and are prepared to pay the necessary price to eliminate such threats.
2. Members of the community opposing a development for environmental reasons. In some cases the environmental hypochondria reflects genuine concern based on ignorance and sometimes fuelled by provocative or imaginative media reports. In other cases, it is contrived as an excuse to mask the real reasons for such opposition, which may relate to real estate prices or basic 'nimbyism'. Such contrived concerns can be compared with the child who feigns illness to avoid having to go to school.
3. Staff of consent or advisory authorities who either lack the professional experience to make confident decisions in relation to environmental issues or, like the community-based malingerers, deliberately play up their concerns to support a hidden agenda of personal or institutional opposition to a proposal.

Environmental hypochondria is a condition which justifies professional treatment, but this is often frustrating for environmental practitioners because such treatment diverts their resources away from other work which would be more productive in achieving good outcomes for the environment. As a consultant, I find that about one third of my time is devoted to addressing issues arising from environmental hypochondria, and that the results of this work contribute nothing towards better environmental outcomes. In some cases the net effect is negative, as human resources and funding are diverted away from discretionary projects which would enhance the environment or the state of environmental knowledge (e.g. rehabilitation projects, monitoring or research). This is one of the tragic aspects of environmental hypochondria.

There is another tragic aspect which can affect the hypochondriacs themselves. I have observed over many years that people who are seen as suffering from the condition, whether genuine or contrived, command a low level of respect within the wider professional community. While they may be highly proficient in the fields in which they are trained, for example, as scientists, town planners or administrators, their professional credibility can suffer enormously once they acquire reputations as environmental hypochondriacs. Consequently, when they do have



valid points to contribute to the environmental debate, their views are readily discounted based on the 'crying wolf' principle.

Extreme cases of environmental hypochondria as experienced by people in positions of influence (e.g. in consent authorities) can have serious consequences in delaying projects or threatening their viability, even where the proponent has addressed environmental issues in a responsible manner. This can lead to a process which a colleague once described to me as 'planning by bankruptcy'. I have witnessed some projects where this description has been too close to the truth to regard such a comment as funny.

A predisposing factor to environmental hypochondria is legislation. Three particular types of legislation which have significantly increased the incidence of environmental hypochondria are those dealing respectively with threatened species, cultural heritage and tree protection. A fixation on trivial issues, real or contrived, arising from such legislation can inhibit the ability of the community and some professional practitioners to focus on the health of the environment from a holistic perspective.

The environmental practitioner faces comparable dilemmas to the medical practitioner in dealing with environmental hypochondria. The easy way out may be to humour the hypochondriac, spend large amounts of one's own time or that of a specialist in investigating and treating the

imaginary problem and convince the client that this is a necessary cost of the project, which must be paid for. I view this as amounting to professional overservicing, something which is deeply frowned on in the medical profession, although the EIANZ Code of Ethics is silent on the topic.

Simply dismissing the concern may be considered appropriate where it is obviously contrived, but is an unsatisfactory solution for people with genuine concerns. Furthermore, where the hypochondriac is in a position of power and can stop or delay a project, this approach is likely to be counter-productive.

This leaves only the approach based on counselling and education, an approach which can also be labour-intensive but which has potential long-term benefits as other professions and the wider community acquire a deeper understanding of the environment and the profession that supports it. This is not an area in which this Institute has been very active to date, but there is ample opportunity to pursue it in the future, potentially in association with the Earth Foundation - Australia, which was established primarily to promote balanced environmental education within the wider community (see page 6). What the Institute could achieve in combating environmental hypochondria, however, depends very much on how much effort its individual members are prepared to contribute.

EIANZ POLICIES ON WEBSITE

A series of environmental policies prepared by the Policy and Practice Standing Committee (PPSC) and adopted by the Council following review by the membership has recently been placed on the website at <http://www.eianz.org> (go to 'Publications').

These policies are as follows:

- Conservation of native vegetation (2000)
- Public environmental reporting (2001)
- Environmental management systems (2001)
- Environmental education (2004)
- Public participation in environmental decision-making (2004)

A further draft policy on energy is current on the website (see 'Homepage') for comment by members.

There is also a set of interim policy overviews (IPOs) which provide a brief summary of those policies which have been adopted or are close to completion.

The PPSC is working on further policies which will be placed on the website in draft form for member comment in due course. Those currently at various stages of preparation and review within the Committee include:

- Climate change
- Sustainability
- Water

Members will be advised when draft policies are available for comment through this newsletter or the monthly e-mail bulletin.

