

**OIL DEPLETION AND HEALTH**  
**AN OPEN LETTER TO MEDICAL PRACTITIONERS**  
**AS WELL AS TO THE GENERAL PUBLIC**

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**This website provides information on fossil fuel depletion and ways to manage that depletion. This issue is of critical importance to the health and welfare, and even the very survival, of many Australians.**

**Why doctors are especially the focus of this web page: -**

DSP feels that, because doctors' basic training deals with biology and health management, including family planning, they are well able to understand the issues and what remedial action is necessary. However, this material does not contain medical jargon and would be easily understood by non-medical general public.

**Sir Macfarlane Burnet: -** DSP shares the concerns of that eminent Australian, Nobel laureate, Sir Macfarlane Burnet as detailed in his book *Dominant Mammal, 1970*.<sup>1</sup>

**Burnet's "desperate alarm."** Burnet described how he was "desperately alarmed" for the consequences of Australia's (and the world's) high consumption of natural resources, largely due to rapidly increasing human populations. He believed this process would endanger the future of our children and grandchildren, and thus he dedicated his book to his grandchildren. One of Burnet's deep concerns was the rapid depletion of vital energy sources, especially our fossil fuels. He recognised that this could have a devastating effect on health and welfare, as, of course, a good energy supply is vital for modern sophisticated health-care.

**Today's information on oil depletion is indeed alarming: -**Today, it is all too clear that Burnet's desperate alarm was fully justified, and further, that the human situation has deteriorated considerably since *Dominant Mammal* appeared in 1970: This next paragraph comes from a very well researched book on the subject of oil resources published in 2003:

**"The world is about to change dramatically and forever as the result of oil depletion. Within the next few years, the global production of oil will peak. Thereafter, even with a switch to alternative energy sources, industrial societies will have less energy available to do all the things essential to their survival. We are entering a new era, as different from the industrial era as the latter was from medieval times."** <sup>2</sup>

*Without fossil fuels, there seems no way that the world's population, and the Australian population will be sustained. Whether this reduction is voluntary (planned) or involuntary (the result of ensuing violence) is up to us.*

It may seem surprising to have such scientific evidence promulgated first by a group of doctors, rather than investigative journalists, but the following is what *many eminent oil geologists* indeed believe. *It is now quite clear that their logic is unassailable.*

**What the oil geologists are saying:-** In recent decades, compelling evidence has come to light of an impending, destabilising shortage of fossil fuels, especially of oil. This has been made progressively more clear, especially through an organization of oil geologists independent of the major companies called the

*Association for the Study of Peak Oil and gas with the acronym of ASPO.*<sup>3,5</sup>

**Almost total denial of the impending crisis:**-The reason most of the population doesn't know of the urgency of oil depletion is because of the actions and statements of business and political leaders which *have led to the almost total denial of the impending crisis.*<sup>4</sup> Business and political leaders fear that panic will drive the economy into recession. *Indeed there can be no doubt that a very deep recession/depression will occur, but to delay the release of information and action on that basis is unconscionable.*

Although it is very clear that the world's economy is reliant on oil and gas (particularly for transportation and agriculture), there is little understanding that further large reserves of these critical energy sources are unlikely to be discovered. Oil geologists know that today only 1 barrel of oil are being discovered for each 4 or more barrels of oil consumed. Thus, in a surprisingly short time, oil production will peak so that a continually increasing serious shortfall will occur. A further serious factor is that experienced oil geologists say that a very important group of major oil producers have greatly inflated the real level of their oil reserves. They have done this so that they could be granted an option by OPEC, (Organisation of Petroleum Oil-exporting Countries), to earn more income from selling their oil.<sup>3-7</sup>

**Critical shortages of oil for agriculture and transport, vast disruptions, world disorder and overwhelming loss of life:** - As supplies decline, oil prices will rise, and many, especially poorer, countries will suffer critical shortages of cheap oil and the food production dependent on it. Unless the above problems are recognized very soon, and appropriate action taken by governments and the United Nations, inevitably societies will break down. There could well be violent competition for fossil fuels and other natural resources, and world disorder could ensue. As Joseph Tainter<sup>8</sup> says, "Collapse for such [modern complex] societies **would almost certainly entail vast disruptions and overwhelming loss of life, not to mention a significantly lower standard of living for the survivors**<sup>8</sup>."

Australia has relatively little oil, and its great distances, its arid climate and the consequent need for irrigation of its arable land mean it is highly dependent on oil for agriculture and transport. Australia is of course one of the most urbanized nations of the world, meaning that relatively large numbers of people have no way of producing their own food.

Burnet's desperate alarm' was because he feared that the depletion of the natural resources such as those of fossil energy, minerals, topsoil, fresh water, forests, fisheries and diversity of species would impoverish future generations. He feared that humankind did not always use its great gift of intelligence. Thus in times of stress such as the depletion of vital resources, humans commonly resort to violence, further endangering sustainability. Such violence comes from so called "Darwinian human behaviour," i.e. behaviour appropriate to "survival of the fittest", the "struggle for personal or group advantage."<sup>4</sup> Widespread massive refugee inflows could occur, in say Europe. Similarly Australia could be overwhelmed by massive inflows of energy- and food-starved Pacific Islanders and Asians.

**Renewable energy sources are at present pitifully inadequate to replace fossil fuels:** - There is currently much faith in the development of renewable energy sources to 'make up the difference.' Sadly, experts believe that that faith is grossly misplaced<sup>5,7</sup>: -So far, the renewable energy sources such as wind, solar, hydrogen combined with developing fuel cell technology, geothermal, tides and waves, biomass, biodiesel, and ethanol, appear pitifully inadequate to replace fossil fuels<sup>5,7</sup>. In particular, the 'hydrogen fuel-cell combination' believed by many to be the great hope of the renewable energy of the future, could cause considerable disappointment because of cost, and other difficulties such as storage and transport. Andrew Ferguson refers to this as '*Hydrogen fantasies*'.<sup>7</sup> This is in spite of considerable promotion of the so-called 'hydrogen economy' by the very well known science writers/authors, such as Jeremy Rifkin and also Amory Lovins of the Rocky Mountains Institute.

**For many reasons it would be very problematic to rely on replacing fossil fuels by increasing use of nuclear fission**<sup>6</sup>. Many years of most expensive research as failed completely to produce power from nuclear fusion. Worthwhile productive sites of the construction of hydro power have already been largely developed.<sup>6</sup>

ASPO, the Association for the Study of Peak Oil, mentioned above, has formulated a Depletion Protocol, under which the nations of the world would ration the remaining reserves of petroleum in and between

nations.<sup>9</sup> There would seem no doubt that this Depletion Protocol is practicable and if adopted would confer immense benefits to signatory nations. Heinberg says, and DSP agrees that, for the world as a whole, it could make the difference between adaptation and survival on one hand, or chaos and disintegration on the other.<sup>10</sup>

Is the situation really as bad as that? Does Australia really face chaos and disintegration! Many eminent people do strongly agree. For example, distinguished Canadian Ronald Wright certainly does in a best selling brilliant book... "this new century will not grow very old before we enter an age of chaos and collapse that will dwarf all the dark ages in our past." <sup>11</sup>

For Australians, quite apart from saving the health, welfare and the very lives of our own loved ones, a very large, group such as the Australian medical profession could reap enormous prestige if it could persuade the Australian Government to accept ASPO's Depletion Protocol. If the Australian Government so moves, it would be the first to do so.

The Australian Medical Association received plaudits for our profession's meritorious work in smoking and seat belt legislation, but today's crisis greatly transcends smoking and seat-belt legislation in importance.

The essential basis of the Depletion Protocol is that Signatory nations would agree to reduce their oil consumption gradually and uniformly according to a simple formula that works out to a little less than three per cent per year. This figure of 3 per cent is close to the annual depletion rate of the world's oil reserves.<sup>10</sup>

A United States engineer, John Howe, has carefully analysed the situation, and has recently published concrete proposals for the USA to immediately commence conservation of fossil fuels, including details of how these can increasingly be replaced by renewable energy sources, using today's technology.<sup>12</sup> His book has been endorsed by ASPO, (mentioned above, the Association of the Study of Peak Oil). It is hoped that such proposals (the Depletion Protocol and John Howe's plan) will be examined with urgency by the Australian Medical Association as well as by the governments of Australia and the other nations of the world. The earlier such remedial action is taken, the less suffering there will be worldwide.

**National governments and the UN must work together.**<sup>9</sup> National governments, in Australia and world, and the United Nations must work together in promoting the rationing of fossil fuels, through the implementation of the depletion Protocol. Strategies then need to be developed so that nations can meet sustainable population targets by family planning and population reduction in the most socially acceptable way.

There are at least four reasons why there must be **urgent action to conserve all possible remaining oil stocks**: - **1) For agriculture**, to prevent massive famines as explained above. Otherwise people living in today's huge cities with no opportunities to grow their own food could starve. **2) For development of renewable energies**, such as those listed above, including the "hydrogen – fuel cell economy", which will require very large amounts of fossil fuels<sup>5</sup>. **3) To preserve government services**, not least those of health services such as major hospitals, which today require large inputs of energy. **4) To attempt to preserve civilisation and even our very survival**: - **Current information indicates that our modern civilisation, and even our very survival, are under major threat**<sup>3,4,5,6,8,9,10,11,12</sup>. Some notable authors believe that the threat is so great that there is virtually no hope of avoiding at least major loss of life. Richard Duncan from the *Institute of Energy and Man* has entitled his 2000 presentation to the *Geological Society of North America* *The Peak of World Oil Production and the Road to the Olduvai Gorge*. By this reference he means that the few humans who survive the stress and violence of oil depletion are likely to be forced to return to conditions resembling the Stone Age!<sup>12</sup> DSP certainly hopes that a return to a stone age existence can be avoided!

We must strive to avoid for us and our immediate descendants the catastrophic loss of life seen in collapsing societies examples of which occurred in the 1990s in Rwanda and in the former Yugoslavia. In those countries there is overpopulation and ethnic strife. Add to this a desperate struggle for a limited oil supply!!

Since DSP first posted this website some two years ago, an eminent Canadian archaeologist, Ronald Wright has written *A Short History of Progress* 2004, which is a brilliant, short, inexpensive book dealing brilliantly with DSP concerns. <sup>14</sup>

**IN SUMMARY:- Two problems must be urgently tackled; the remainder can be tackled more at leisure. These two urgent problems are of course are**

1) Worldwide conservation of the remaining fossil fuels. The Depletion Protocol prepared by ASPO and John Howe's plan for the United States must be studied by the Australian Medical Association and world governments. It is of the greatest importance that there is no delay in accepting the Depletion Protocol of ASPO to tackle this impending crisis for the health, welfare, and very survival of Australians.

2) Stabilising and then reducing population levels. If populations stop growing and eventually shrink through a reduction in birth rate then this will help take the pressure off the shortages which are soon to occur.

The Australian Medical Association could reap enormous prestige if it could study all the implications of Peak Oil and the Depletion Protocol of ASPO. Implementing the Depleting Protocol is currently the only hope DSP can see in saving the world from unspeakable suffering. Famine and chaotic disintegration are the alternatives.

DSP will in due course update our website further information on these matters and we would urge all AMA Councillors as well as the general public to study our material on [www.doctorsandpopulation.org](http://www.doctorsandpopulation.org)

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Dr Peter Tod, President, and Michael Harrison, Past President  
Doctors for a Sustainable Population – DSP.

## Notes and References

- 1) Burnet Macfarlane, *Dominant Mammal*, Heinemann, 1970.
- 2) Heinberg, Richard, Publisher's note, *The Party's Over*. New Society Publishers, 2003.
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- 5) Campbell, Colin, in the Foreword of Heinberg, Richard, *The Party's Over*. New Society Publishers, 2003. pages ix-xii.
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- 7) Ferguson, Andrew, *Journal of Optimum Population Trust*, April 2004:1-32.
- 8) Tainter, Joseph, *The Collapse of Complex Societies*, Cambridge University Press, 1988.
- 9) Cochet, Yves, *Toward the Petro-Apocalypse*, Le Monde (Paris) 31.03.04.
- 10) Fission energy: - Here are a few of the reasons why it would be a disastrous error to turn to nuclear power when energy shortages arise due to the depletion of fossil fuels....If the immense expenditures for plant construction and safety, reactor decommissioning, and waste storage are taken into account, nuclear power is very expensive indeed. Serious reactor accidents at Three Mile Island in the USA, at Chernobyl in the old Soviet Union and elsewhere have occurred. Today nuclear power accounts for only five per cent of the total energy consumed.
- 11) Kingston Margo, *Oils ain't just oils, they're to die for*, Sun-Herald 16.5.04.
- 12) Duncan Richard, of the Institute on Energy and Man has compiled data for more than 98 per cent of the world's oil production. He reported to the Geological Society of America, November 13, 2000. His Figure 4 of *The Peak of World Oil Production*, 2000, entitled *The Olduvai Theory: 1930-2030* is dramatic and is shown in his website:- <http://dieoff.com/page224.htm>
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- 14) Wright, Ronald, *A Short History of Progress*, Text Publishing, 2004.