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‘Oil, health and healthcare’

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Report by Paul Goddard
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Report

At the Bristol Medico Chirurgical Society meeting on Wednesday 11th Jan 2012 Dr Raffle provided a wake-up call to all those who might feel that the present financial turmoil was just a temporary blip from which we would recover. In particular the old days of working towards a good retirement and pension were over. Things would not go back the way they were ... and the reason was pretty obvious to those who looked. We had passed peak oil and from now on the extraction of the energy sources would become considerably more expensive. Couple that with the increasing energy demands from emerging economies such as China and India and it was clear that the West was in for a period of decline. Whether that was to be carefully managed decline was, she opined, up to the people of the developed world including, of course, ourselves.

There were no simple solutions. There may be plenty of coal but it was expensive to mine and heavily polluting. The nuclear power industry had reached a “cliff edge” with many power stations about to be closed down. So the only way was down. But this is not a talked-about topic because collapse is an upsetting subject.

Complex societies collapse, Dr Raffle told us, due to increasing complexity and the law of diminishing returns. People like to believe that we get more efficient but in fact that does not appear to be the case. For example: maintenance has been replaced by upgrading

Korowicz has said that we are not in the middle of a financial crisis but at the beginning of a civilizational one. Will the money system continue to work, given that it has no intrinsic value and relies on confidence in its worth?

Local Response

To help counter this Bristol is producing a local currency. There will be printed notes, usable in shops and businesses around Bristol, backed technologically by mobile phones and texting. Indeed, Bristol City Council is the only local government authority to have produced a report on peak oil and must be commended for at least trying.

The Future

Thus we are in a period of transition and peak oil is an under-discussed but very important topic.

Looking to the future there are a number of prevailing views as to what should be done. The techno fantasy is that we will invent new technology that will get us out of trouble and allow expansion to continue.

The green tech stability view is that we will be able to maintain energy levels as they are using a variety of techniques such as wind farms and solar panels.

Creative descent is perhaps the best option, stated Dr Raffle for the only other possibility is anarchy and disaster.

The Built Environment

Discussing the built environment Dr Raffle remarked that there should be higher density of population in our towns and cities. It was madness to consider using green belt land for housing It was essential that all available land should be used for food production.

Sustainable Redland was trying to show the way by encouraging local food production and running the farmers’ market on Whiteladies Road.

Community medicine

With regard to medicine we should be looking to work closely within and around our communities to produce essential medicines and by creating a network of helpers and carers. This could lead to the development of community supported health care facilities.

If we wait for government it will be a case of “Too little , Too late”.

If we act as individuals it will simply be “Too little”

If we act as communities it may just be enough.

Discussion after the lecture

Following the lecture there was a wide-ranging questions and answer session. The question was asked as to who was to make the hard decisions with regard to rationing of health services? That there would inevitably be an increasing dichotomy between the have and have-nots was raised. The significance of peak Uranium and the end of cheap nuclear power was also discussed.

Bibliography

Dr Raffle illustrated the talk with many interesting graphs and statistics. She recommended the following viewing and reading:

- 1) The century of the self: BBC 4 part documentary series
- 2) Edward Bernays Propaganda (1928)
- 3) The Transition Handbook’ and ‘the Transition Companion’ both by Rob Hopkins
- 4) Donella Meadows’s Thinking in systems
- 5) Angela E Raffle:BMJ editorial ‘Oil, Health and Health Care’ BMJ 2010; 341:c4596