

Reiter, Bitten by the IPCC

Lawrence Solomon, Financial Post

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The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is very particular about the scientists it selects to investigate the health consequences of global warming. Those the likes of Paul Reiter needn't apply.

Prof. Reiter heads the Insects and Infectious Disease Unit at the Pasteur Institute, famed for its founding by Louis Pasteur in 1887 and the eight Nobel Prizes that its later scientists received. Prior to joining the Pasteur Institute, Prof. Reiter directed the entomology section at the Dengue Branch of the Centers for Disease Control, the path-breaking U.S. government agency. Prof. Reiter is also known for his work as an officer of the Harvard School of Public Health, his membership on the World Health Organization's Expert Advisory Committee on Vector Biology and Control, and, among administrative positions, his role as lead author of the Health Section of the U.S. National Assessment of the Potential Consequences of Climate Variability and Change.

Because of his history of excellence in researching diseases transmitted by mosquitoes and other insects, the U.S. State Department in 2001, upon the recommendation of its own health authorities, nominated Prof. Reiter to be a lead author of the IPCC's next health chapter. Global warming was increasing the habitats for mosquitoes, many feared, putting hundreds of millions of people in the tropics at risk of contracting malaria and dengue, and raising the spectre that these diseases would spread around the world. Prof. Reiter, in the view of U.S. health experts, was particularly well placed to address this research.

The IPCC selected two other candidates, more suitable in filling the role required of them. At the time of their selection, neither was distinguished by having published peer-reviewed articles dealing with mosquito-borne disease. Both were distinguished by their conviction about the dangers to human health of climate change.

Prof. Reiter was not entirely surprised that the IPCC passed him over -- he has been a critic of the science it has disseminated. And neither was he surprised at the IPCC's failure to select scientists specializing in mosquito-borne diseases, despite the outsized role of malaria and dengue in previous IPCC reports. The IPCC faced an impossible task in finding such an expert.

"I know of no major scientist with any long record in this field who agrees with the pronouncements of the alarmists at the IPCC," states Prof. Reiter, whose history in his research field spans three decades and five continents, and who is well familiar with the scope of work occurring in the mosquito-borne research community.

"On the contrary, all of us who work in the field are repeatedly stunned by the IPCC pronouncements. We protest, but are rarely quoted, and if so, usually as a codicil to the scary stuff."

In one of the IPCC's most egregious errors, in its Second Assessment Report chapter on human population health, it created the scare -- repeated by scientists with a popular following such as David Suzuki -- that global warming could lead to 80 million additional cases of malaria per year worldwide. The IPCC scientists' "glaring ignorance" dumbfounded Prof. Reiter and his colleagues. For example, the IPCC claimed that malarial mosquitoes cannot ordinarily survive temperatures below 16C to 18C, not realizing that many tropical species do and that many temperate species survive temperatures of -- 25C. Likewise, IPCC scientists didn't know at what altitudes mosquitoes can be found.

As Prof. Reiter testified to a U.K. parliamentary committee in 2005, "The paucity of information was hardly surprising: Not one of the lead authors had ever written a research paper on the subject! Moreover, two of the authors, both physicians, had spent their entire career as environmental activists. One of these activists has published "professional" articles as an "expert" on 32 different subjects, ranging from mercury poisoning to land mines, globalization to allergies and West Nile virus to AIDS. "Among the contributing authors there was one professional entomologist, and a person who had written an obscure article on dengue and El Nino, but whose principal interest was the effectiveness of motorcycle crash helmets (plus one paper on the health effects of cellphones)."

How do such people become numbered among the IPCC's famed "2,500 top scientists" from around the world? Prof. Reiter, wanting to know, wrote the IPCC with a series of detailed questions about its decision-making process. It replied: "The brief answer to your question below is 'governments.' It is the governments of the world who make up the IPCC, define its remit and direction. The way in which this is done is defined in the IPCC Principles and Procedures, which have been agreed by governments." When Prof. Reiter checked out the "principles and procedures," he found "no mention of research experience, bibliography, citation statistics or any other criteria that would define the quality of 'the world's top scientists.'"

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First and foremost, Prof. Reiter believes, the IPCC is a creature of government that meets governmental needs and abides by governmental strictures, and does so without public scrutiny. In contrast, studies conducted under the more open auspices of the U.S. government's Global Climate Change Research program, for example, are entirely in the public domain.

Even the peer-review process -- ordinarily designed to ensure rigorous science -- has mutated to meet IPCC needs. In professional science, the names of peer reviewers are kept confidential to encourage independent criticism, free of recrimination, while the deliberations of the authors being critiqued are made public.

"The IPCC turns this on its head," Prof. Reiter explains. "The peer reviewers have to give their names to the authors, but the deliberations of the authors are strictly confidential." In effect, the science is spun, disagreements purged, and results predetermined.

"The Intergovernmental Panel is precisely that -- it is a panel among governments. Any scientist who participates in this process expecting the strictures of science to reign must beware, lest he be stung."

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CV OF A DENIER:

Paul Reiter, Professor at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, is chief of its Insects and Infectious Disease Unit and a specialist in the natural history and biology of mosquitoes, the epidemiology of the diseases they transmit, and strategies for their control. He was chairman of the American Committee of Medical Entomology of the American Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, and of several committees of other professional societies. He has worked for the World Health Organization, the Pan American Health Organization and other agencies in investigations of outbreaks of mosquito-borne diseases, as well as of AIDS and Ebola haemorrhagic fever and onchocerciasis. He was also a contributory author of the IPCC Third Assessment Report. He has been chairman of the American Committee of Medical Entomology of the American Society for Tropical Medicine and Hygiene, and of several committees of other professional societies. He received his PhD in Medical Entomology from the University of Sussex in 1978.