

Foresight in Action (1996)

New Viruses

One of the areas in which the benefits of careful foresight are most clearly revealed is in relation to new items 'in the pipeline.' That is, phenomena which careful environmental scanning suggest will have a range of social impacts. If these impacts are simply allowed to occur, they will entail a range of social costs, some of them heavy. But if they are understood well before they become unavoidable, this knowledge can be used to mitigate the effects or even avoid them entirely....

One of the great unforeseen tragedies of the 20th century is the AIDS pandemic. It has cut a swathe through a number of societies and caused untold human suffering. However, it is unlikely to be the last of its kind. Now that we are so profoundly out of balance with the environment that supports us, the global system is responding in a range of ways: by a decline in biodiversity, a progressive reduction in biological productivity in many areas and also by the emergence of new diseases. Together these are increasing the force of what ecologists call 'environmental pressure' upon us, in effect constantly raising the stakes for all humanity.

Some diseases are old ones that are bouncing back, having adapted to the chemical and biological onslaught that we have exerted upon them. Malaria, for example, which was once thought to be eradicable, has been steadily on the rise for some time. However, with AIDS we are witnessing the beginning of another phenomenon: the emergence of new viruses. It is significant that AIDS did not burst suddenly upon the world unannounced. There were early warning signs for those willing to heed them. But the institutional response was very slow at first. These delays permitted the disease to take hold and spread, infecting the blood supply in the process and eventually killing thousands of innocent people. A dramatised version of the events can be seen in the film tragically entitled: *And The Band Played On*.

Foresight is not a panacea for all eventualities. For example, it is unhelpful in those limited cases where something quite new and wholly unprecedented happens. It is much more usual for a series of 'signals', or early indications, to occur. The key point is that, with foresight, those signals can be detected, understood and responded to. Without it, that is when no-one is paying attention, the signals rise and recede again into the background. Critical time is lost and the warning goes unheeded. We are arguably in that situation with many phenomena in the late 20th century. The emergence of new viruses is merely one of them.

According to Richard Preston, author of *The Hot Zone*, the first known appearance of the filovirus known as Ebola Zaire, 'occurred in September 1976, when it erupted simultaneously in fifty-five villages near the headwaters of the Ebola river' (in Zaire). 'It seemed to come out of nowhere, and killed nine out of ten people it infected.' It was a particularly unpleasant way to die - the bodies literally 'melting down' and leaking inflected liquids through every orifice. In January 1980 a man called Charles Monet died a similarly unpleasant death in a hospital in Nairobi. Other individual cases were

reported and an expedition was mounted to what was thought to be the source of the outbreak. But, mysteriously, the virus could not be found.

Preston's book is largely about what happened when a consignment of infected monkeys was delivered to a lab just outside Washington DC in the USA. It was the first clear case of an outbreak of the Ebola virus in a Western context. The disease spread rapidly through the air inside the lab and monkeys began to die. A military-style clean-up operation was mounted and a human disaster was averted. But this was not due to human action. Two of the scientists who had worked with the animals also became infected and, if the earlier rehearsals had been replicated, they would have been the vectors through which the virus spread to the general population. But in this particular outbreak some minor feature of that specific strain of the virus meant that it did not explode in human beings the way the Zaire strain had. Humanity had missed a devastating outbreak by sheer chance.

Preston's view that other such viruses are now 'silently cycling in remote tropical ecosystems' has been confirmed by other microbiologists. Those ecosystems are no longer remote. As development, logging, agriculture and the steady expansion of human populations occur, so these sanctuaries are being routinely breached. Hence further outbreaks can be confidently expected.

What this and similar examples suggest is that humanity has reached a point in its development and its tenancy upon this small planet when environmental scanning and applied foresight have become vital protectors of the over-extended social order. (In the original piece) I considered three specific areas of concern. But there are many more. Clearly we cannot avoid all dangers. But the systematic implementation of foresight would allow us to avoid many of the worst learning experiences brought on by short-sighted thinking. When foresight is successful it averts the need for social learning by disaster: flood, famine, war and disease. When it is ignored, these are precisely what we must expect.

However let us also remember that foresight is not merely about averting dangers. It is also about articulating the kind of futures we truly desire and then putting in place the means to 'steer' in just that direction.

Notes

Preston, T. *The Hot Zone* (1994), New York: Random House.
<https://archive.org/details/THEHOTZONE/page/n1/mode/2up>

Spottiswood, R. (Dir. 1993), *And the Band Played On*, TV Movie.
<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0106273/>

Also see Garrett, L. *The Coming Plague: Newly Emerging Diseases in a World Out of Balance* (1994), London: Virago Press. <https://www.lauriegarrett.com/the-coming-plague>

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