

SPECIAL GUEST LECTURE

21. "Dedicated to the health of children? Then call yourself an environmentalist."

Michael L. Fischer,
The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation

DR. GUERRA: As I was saying, it is truly for me a privilege to introduce someone who's very special to our community and to the Children's Environmental Health Institute. Mike Fischer and I have been friends for a very long time. Mike is currently the program officer for some of the very special programs dealing with environmental considerations for The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, a California-based foundation. He has truly spent a good part of his life in dealing with environmental issues. He began his career as a city planner for the City of Mountain View in California. He was the executive director of the California Coastal Commission during Governor Brown's administration. He was executive director of the National Sierra Club for six years, and before he joined the Hewlett Foundation, he was the executive director of the Coastal Conservancy in California—a lifelong history of involvement with many very important environmental initiatives.

Mike currently serves on the advisory council to the Calvert Social Investment Fund and on the board of directors for the High Country Foundation. Mike earned his bachelor's degree in political science at Santa Clara University and his master's in city and regional planning at the University of California, Berkeley. He has been a resident in the Institute of Politics and was a fellow at the Harvard University's John Kennedy School of Government.

So for me, it truly is a privilege to have Mike visit us, and especially to know that he's going to share some of his thoughts with us. Mike.

MR. FISCHER: Gracias. Thank you very much. I'm not a doctor, and so kind of feel like the odd person here. Your practice and your work is a grand, grand public service, and in the name of my grandkids, I thank you for devoting your life to this public service. And it's also really wonderful to be back with Dr Fernando Guerra, here in my hometown. Fernando and I met each other for the first day at the first day of freshman high school class at Central Catholic High School here in San Antonio.

Here's a thumbnail sketch on what I have to say. "We don't inherit the earth from our parents or grandparents. Instead, we borrow it from our children." Not an original quote of mine, but a message that I think is particularly relevant to all of us. Above my desk I have a quote by John Muir, who was the founder of the Sierra Club. Muir said many things, but the quote that I have above my desk is where he said that when you try to pick out any one thing by itself, you find that it's hitched to everything else in the universe. I submit to you that environmental health is the coming human rights challenge, and today's children are on the front line of that challenge. Speaking of "challenge," I have a challenge for you. I believe, and I say this with respect and humility, that clinical work is essential and important and deeply honorable, but it's not sufficient to deliver the results to which you're investing your lives. I'll get back to that in the end of my talk.

I left San Antonio 42 years ago and moved to what was then called the Valley of Heart's Delight. We actually did call Santa Clara Valley in California the Valley of Heart's Delight. The towns of San Jose, Santa Clara, Cupertino, Saratoga, Palo Alto, and Menlo Park, were all walkable neighborhoods surrounding a small downtown, surrounded by a sea of orchards. On Spring Sundays, our family would get in the car and we could drive for an hour to the south of our house or an hour to the east of our house, and see mile after mile, and smell mile after mile, blooming orchard trees. And the mountain ridges, redwood covered to the west and dun grass-covered to the east, Mount Hamilton looming above, those mountain ridges were crisp and clear every day. The population of California was 16 million people in 1960 when I left. The population of California 40 years later has doubled. It's now 33 or 34 million, and flying over the Valley of Heart's Delight, I doubt that any of the very many people now living in Silicon Valley, which it's now called, even knows that it was once called the Valley of Heart's Delight. It certainly is not an appropriate name for the valley any more. Seldom can you see those ridges, and flying over it, there's not even a vestigial scrap of orchard left. Those communities which were set in the matrix of orchards now run together in a sea of suburbia, crisscrossed by freeways and sprawl and strip malls.

Forty years from today, California's population is projected to double yet again—between 60 and 65 million people is the estimate. Forty years from today sounds like a long way away, but it actually doesn't to me, when I think of it in terms of only 40 years ago. That seems very quick. But 40 years from now I'll be 100, actually 102, and unlikely to be here. The point is what kind of future can we design for my grandkids, Jenna and Ryan? They're now six and three. It is their urban future that we are designing for them today. They are powerless today to establish the pattern and the health, mental health if not any other kind of health, of their future. So whenever I see Ryan and Jenna, I feel an even more intense commitment to seeking to avoid the mistakes of the past.

Let me take you now to Kilimanjaro. Within 40 years, the snow and ice cap on Mount Kilimanjaro, which has been there for millennia, will be gone. The snow and ice cap on Kilimanjaro, as are the glaciers around the planet, are melting at an ever-increasing rate. Not only Kilimanjaro, but within 40 years the snow and ice cap on the top of the Himalayas will be reduced by more than 50 percent of where it is now.

Why am I telling you this? Well, those snow and ice caps are nature's reservoirs, and particularly in the Himalayas, they serve as the headwaters for every one of the major rivers that serves, at today's numbers, half of the people on the planet, in all of Asia and South Asia. Water is my point here, and 40 years is not a very long time from now.

Water—life depends on it, and water happens to be distributed by and large around the planet where people are not. More than one billion people today, mostly in rural areas but also in the large urban cities of India and Pakistan, lack access to safe water. As a result, waterborne diseases are endemic; diarrhea, being the most common. Diarrhea and its related diseases kill, depending on whether you look at the World Health Organization or the U.N. estimates, each year between 3 and 12 million children below the age of five. Contrast that with the 300 children who die of asthma each year in the United States, a severe serious problem worthy of our attention, certainly. But at least 3 million children below the age of five dying every year?

You're thinking, Kilimanjaro, Bangladesh, Pakistan, China, India—what's that got to do with us? Well, come home to La Frontera. Come home to the Edwards Aquifer.

The U.S./Mexican border is the fastest growing urban population in the Americas. Several years ago, I stood on a hill in a colonia in Ciudad Juarez, several hundred yards south of the border, watching a program that UTEP and NMSU and UACJ had collaborated in, to bring plastic Porta-potties to 100 of the shacks in this colonia of several thousand houses. This was a typical colonia. No piped water. The only water available is delivered by pretty grungy-looking trucks and poured at relatively high rates into pretty grungy-looking tin buckets. And the electricity here was snaking along the ground—bootlegged electricity to serve the houses. But this senior citizen was very proudly opening the flap on the toilet and showing me the results and the sawdust and very proudly indicating that he and his family were going to be able to enjoy the privacy of pooping in this plastic box, and he was going to be able to use the sawdust for fertilizer. He explained to me that all the other families around that didn't have these plastic Porta-potties had to defecate in, as he put it, *el libre aire*. You know or can imagine the heat and the dust there, and with the desiccation that occurs, much of this material immediately goes into the atmosphere and is a serious health hazard. But standing there on that hillside, I was able to look across the river, less than a mile away, at this truly incongruous University of Texas El Paso campus, which was designed, after a Bhutanese monastery. Next door to the university is the locked-gate community of higher-end houses, and less than a mile away, I could see shimmering blue swimming pools. The gulf between wealth and poverty is nowhere on the planet as great as the gulf of wealth and poverty between the U.S. and Mexico in our La Frontera.

You know about the anger on both sides of the border about the quality and quantity of water along the entire Rio Bravo. The same is true with the Rio Colorado and the Rio Tijuana. Tijuana is the largest and fastest growing large city on the coast of North Central and South America. With the population growth rate and the overdraft of the fossil water and the bolsones (aquifers) that span the border, we haven't seen anything yet.

Cast your mind back to Bangladesh for just a second, and you can flip-flop and see that water and population growth is a public health crisis that's looming, and with which most of you will have to deal.

I actually spent second and third grade living in Weslaco, down on the border, and I remember in that house, vying with my sister for the use of the flit can of DDT, because we really liked the smell of the DDT, that tangy, dry, dusty smell. We particularly enjoyed opening up the silverware drawer and flitting the silverware. I don't think people do that any more. And I also remember getting a chemistry kit when I was ten years old, and in the kit was a vial of mercury. I was delighted to be able to take the mercury and roll it around in my hand and dip a penny and a dime in the mercury and coat them, so that they were bright and shiny. And when the mercury ran out, I went down to the drug store in San Antonio and I bought another vial. My dad went to visit Oak Ridge, Tennessee, and he came back with a souvenir for me. It was an irradiated dime in a little aluminum and plastic capsule, which I proudly carried in my pocket for a month or so until the radiation on the dime clouded the plastic and you couldn't see what was inside, so who knows where I threw it. And I had lead soldiers, of course. I also remember going in to buy shoes in San Antonio, and I'd put the shoes on and stick my feet in the slot of an x-ray machine about two-thirds the size of this podium. Then I pushed the button to see whether the bones in my feet were cramped or not. And, finally, growing up here in Texas with no hat and no sunscreen. So here are six things that hopefully people aren't doing any more, except perhaps for the sun exposure.

Environmental justice; we haven't talked about that much at this conference yet. I hope you do. Environmental racism is the elephant in the room, especially here in Texas. My friend Bob Bullard, who is a well-published author on environmental justice issues, did his Ph.D. dissertation in Houston, and the light came on over his head when he found that at the time, ten of the eleven solid waste dumps in Houston were located in African-American neighborhoods, although the African-American population in Houston was less than 10 percent. He said "Coincidence? Don't think so."

When I was head of the Sierra Club, I challenged our Dallas group of the Texas chapter when I learned that they were doing nothing about the issue of the lead smelter over in West Dallas. An organization called Texans United was dealing with that. Someone said "Oh, our members live mostly in North Dallas around the university, so we're not involved in that issue." I asked "Well, tell me this. If the lead smelter were in North Dallas, would you be involved?"

Around about the same time, I was talking to a University of Texas epidemiologist about environmental justice issues, particularly along the border, and he said that the first advice that he gives to communities of color who are suffering from increased morbidity is, and this was well before the Erin Brockovich movie, not to bring in CDC. He said "Call up CDC, they'll spend \$3 million, they'll take three years, and they will document that there is no provable cause and effect, and your case in court or in the court of public opinion will be forever damaged. So don't bring in the scientists. They will hurt; not help."

Coincidence? Again at the Sierra Club, I had the opportunity to visit a Cancer Alley, that stretched between Baton Rouge and New Orleans in Louisiana. At the time, Taiwan Plastics was seeking to locate a plant, a plant that wouldn't have been acceptable in Taiwan. So they were looking for a third-world country in which they could build this plant, and they found one. It was called Louisiana. You'll recall from yesterday's presentation that it was Louisiana that beat out Texas for the largest number of neurotoxic emissions.

Back to Houston. I remember only three or four years ago, I went out from the hotel early in the morning to go jogging. As I opened the door and I looked up at the green-yellow atmosphere, I gasped at the pollution and said to the African-American doorman "God, it's really polluted today." And he said, Oh, no, sir. That's not pollution. That's the color and smell of money." Well, what an irony for us to have led a person of color who was really being impacted more heavily than anyone else to believe that in order to have a job, you have to accept pollution. It is not inevitable.

It is a common myth that people of color and lower-income people either don't have an interest in environmental issues or the time to worry about those problems. At least in California, that's dead wrong. About a half a dozen polls over the last two years, polls by the Latino Issues Forum and the Public Policy Institute of California have shown that, depending upon the environmental issue, the interest and concern of the Latino respondents in California for environmental issues was between one and ten percentage points higher than the Anglo respondents. And they have demonstrated this commitment in several recent environmental bond issues, which would not have carried without the African-American and Latino votes.

Food. Farmed salmon. I'll simply say this—don't buy farmed salmon. It's laced with PCBs. It has no omega-3 fatty acids. It's got the same amount of damaging fat, ounce for ounce, as bacon does. They kill tons of fish in Chile to grind them up to make the artificial food that they feed to these penned creatures, and they dump lots of antibiotics into the water. I've been there in British Columbia, on both sides of Vancouver Island, and have seen guys patrolling the nets with rifles, to kill the seals and sea lions that try to break through the net to get at the fish.

Air. In Los Angeles, the air is so polluted with ten cancer-causing chemicals that residents there face a cancer risk 1,005 times the level considered safe by EPA. In San Francisco, the average infant will exceed the EPA's lifetime exposure to toxic air pollutants in 19 days.

In Los Angeles, it takes 12 days for that infant to breathe the lifetime exposure that EPA suggests. The principal offending agent is diesel engines. If those are the numbers in San Francisco and Los Angeles, what about Houston?

So as I said at the beginning, I have a challenge for you, and I place this challenge on the table with respect and with admiration.

The challenge, as I suggested, is based on the assumption that clinical work is essential but not sufficient in order to deliver the protection and the promotion of child health to which you're dedicating your lives. So I hope that every day at work you'll see your job as having at least three parts. First, as clinicians, take the environmental history quite aggressively so you don't miss the diagnosis. Second, again as clinicians, teach prevention quite aggressively. And third, beyond your clinical practice, but integrated into who you are and what you do, consciously devote a percentage of your time to being an opinion leader, either directly or indirectly. Be proactive in your community, as Laura suggested. Be alert to public policy opportunities. It doesn't mean you've got to wave a sign. It doesn't mean you've got to be a lobbyist, although that's not bad. It doesn't mean you've got to be a card-carrying member of Physicians for Social Responsibility, although that would be great. But be a mindful environmentalist, without apology, in the way that John Muir and Rachel Carson would want you to be. Remember that the clinical work that you do is deeply honorable, but is not enough.

Let me give you just the headings of what you should teach and advocate. I suggest that you focus on five topics: population growth, poverty, water quality, food quality, and air quality. Population and consumption, or population growth and poverty, are the underlying bedrock of factors which really need to be changed. We can tinker with everything else in the environmental community, but if we don't address poverty and population growth, everything else is rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Unlike other health care professionals, you, whose patients cannot speak for themselves, have a special duty to be advocates for their health. Don't ignore it. You have an opportunity to influence public policy at the local and national level. In doing so, you will confront, inescapably, vested interests. You shouldn't shrink from it. Just look at the impact of Rachel Carson. Stand on her shoulders. Honor her memory, and serve your young clients foremost.

Let me close with something that I hope you find truly inspirational and that you will bookmark on your computer and refer to from time to time. The Library of Congress has initiated a wonderful program. It's called the River of Words; the website is www.riverofwords.org.

Each year, grade school kids are asked to compete and to either make a drawing or painting or write a poem about their home watershed. Some of this artwork is stunning, and I'm going to read you a poem by an eight-year-old. The title of his poem is "Just Imagine".

"Just imagine waking up one day, looking out your window, starting to say, No bad smells.

No smoke, no noise, no trash, no crowded playgrounds.

Basketball courts are corners loaded with teams.

No bad words on the window and sidewalk.

No junk, no muddy waters, no hunger, no poor.

No peer pressure, no envy, no name-calling.

No guns. No fear, no pain, no murder, no drugs.

No dead birds, because of.
No dead grass, because of.
No dead trees, because of.
No dead people, because of.
Clean up. Care.
Help each other.
Play. Go outside and play.
Run, skip, jump, ride.
Smile, be happy, be safe.
And just imagine being a kid,
on the banks of the Anacostia River.”

That was L.J. Johnson, age eight, River Terrace Elementary School, Anacostia, Maryland. His teacher, Patricia Ann Goodnight and, I'd suggest, each of you, given your patients, has the ability to teach hope and to teach, as John Muir said, the interconnectedness of everything.

Thanks for your attention.