So should you buy this book? It is not the only account of the EIS but it is the most accessible. I will buy more than one and then give them to younger colleagues considering a job in public health and needing inspiration.

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This is a thought-provoking, interesting, unusual and ultimately rather annoying little book. The authors are well-known researchers in medical statistics and public health, and their thesis is simple: that obesity and global warming are both symptoms of a common cause, namely abundant and unrealistically cheap energy from the profligate use of fossil fuels. The global warming story is well known, and they do not spend too much time on that. The obesity angle is more subtle and to me (as an oceanographer primarily interested in climate change) more novel and more interesting.

They assert that the recent increased prevalence of obesity in the developed world is an inevitable consequence of wholesale shifts of the frequency distributions of body mass index (BMI) of whole populations: not just more ‘rogue’ obese individuals. These shifts in turn are due to the widespread combination of two causes: eating too much high-energy food and getting too little exercise. No surprises there, and the first of these is clearly exacerbated because such foods are easily available and cheap, all based on intensive agriculture sustained by artificial fertilizers made using cheap energy from fossil fuels. The second, less obviously, is due not only to laziness and excessive use of cars even for short journeys (and towns designed to make that easy), but also to pedestrians and cyclists being driven off the roads by cars. That is also down to cheap energy from fossil fuels, even after it has been handsomely taxed, and of course these causes interact. Once one has got too fat, walking and cycling become less comfortable, so one is more likely to drive, and things can only get worse.

Ian Roberts works on the prevention and treatment of serious injuries, mostly caused by road accidents, so his views on this need are to be taken seriously. They are also borne out by our personal experience. We all fear for the safety of our children when they walk or cycle to school or to visit friends. I am fortunate enough to live in a rural area, and I always walk and cycle on Forest paths and tracks, and not even on our quiet country lanes, if I can. There are still too many cars, going too fast, even here (and there are too many cyclists now, too, but that is another story).

So, in all essentials, the case is persuasive, powerfully made and difficult to fault. The prescription also seems to be clear: a higher price on carbon, whether it is delivered by ‘cap & trade’ or by a carbon tax, would obviously help. In the case of fuel for cars (and planes) that may not be enough. Motor fuels cost about four times more in Europe than in the USA, because of taxes, but we still drive far too much (and

References

our cars are only moderately more efficient). Ultimately, we may find that we need some sort of rationing in the form of individual carbon quotas, or allocations of ‘air miles’ that you are able to spend, not receive as a perk. So be it.

Why, then, do I still find the book a bit annoying? For two reasons. First, the authors argue that obesity is primarily an environmental problem, not a personal one: that we become obese because we live in a world flooded with high-energy food that is shoved under our noses at every available opportunity. True, but we are not forced to eat it. We can refuse. As someone who has just reduced his BMI (on doctor’s orders) by 5% in 6 months simply by eating a little less and exercising a little more, I know that it is not just environmental. Let us not have Nature versus Nurture all over again. The right answer here is clearly also ‘Both’, and we should address both aspects of the problem, not disempower and demotivate people by suggesting to them that they are helpless victims of the big, bad food industry. Secondly, much of the central part of the book (and the whole of Chapter 6) is a paean in praise of cycling, and walking only gets a look in after another 50 pages or so. Now, we can all agree that cars and people do not mix well on the streets. However, if the authors are right that ‘Cycling...is the future for urban transport’ we should take care. A short visit to either Oxford or Cambridge during term time will suffice to demonstrate that bikes and people do not mix well either. I never went to Beijing when it had 9 million bicycles, but I bet it was difficult to cross the street.

So, ‘The Energy Glut’ presents a basically sound case, passionately argued with a good sprinkling of pithy statements: e.g. ‘petroleum is sunlight jam’. It offers ‘a low-energy diet for a fat and fevered planet’, and falls short only insofar as it seeks to oversimplify the solutions. Getting back on our bikes should certainly help, but it is not the whole story.

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