



due to a complex psychosomatic process, a theory that has since been relegated to the ash can of etiologic speculation. If an herb happens to ameliorate symptoms, the effect may be due to a placebo effect, especially among patients disenchanted with modern medical pharmacology.

Curiously, herbal compounds appear to have no value in treating acute illness. Although these herbs — it is politically incorrect to call them drugs yet because profits may tumble — may have active ingredients, as Ken Keirstead was quoted as stating, there is little if any scientific evidence that they really do anything. Is St. John's wort significantly better than placebo in carefully conducted clinical trials? Does *Ginkgo biloba* really increase oxygen supply to the brain in patients with Alzheimer's disease, as CNN informed me the other night? Most puzzling is the fact that the prestigious US National Institutes of Health has bowed to the media darlings and received funding for research involving "alternative medicine."

And most surprising of all is that organized medicine raises not a whimper about all of this. Science, I would have thought, is the only means we have to separate the truth from whim, fraud and, of course, simple stupidity!

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## Perspectives on overpopulation

**D**r. W. Harding le Riche, in his letter "Overpopulation and Rwanda" (*CMAJ* 1998;158[7]:868-9) is joking, right? Rwanda has just lost 800 000 people to genocide and, if it is like its neighbours, the country's population will also be decimated by HIV.

And yet le Riche proposes better population control. The logic escapes me.

The West, in its arrogance and hubris, has done enough to harm Africa. Leave population control to the Africans. If le Riche wants to reduce Africa's birth rates, let him agitate for development of a malaria vaccine or improve women's educational status in Rwanda or pursue some other helpful goal. If women in Africa did not see so many of their children die of malaria or diarrhea or measles, they might have fewer children. The same forces operated on population size in the West 100 years ago.

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**D**r. le Riche is absolutely correct in suggesting that the carrying capacity of all countries must be considered as the world population continues to increase.

At the University of British Columbia, the School of Community and Regional Planning has been developing methods of planning for healthy and sustainable communities. On the basis

of the average consumption demands of citizens as measured by carbon dioxide emission, purchasing power, vehicles per 100 persons, paper consumption, and use of fossil energy and fresh water, an ecological "footprint" was calculated for 1991.<sup>1</sup> The global average was 1.8 hectares per person, but those in the developed world have much larger "footprints." The people of the Lower Fraser Valley in BC depend on land 19 times the area in which they live to satisfy demands for food, forest products and fossil fuel. Holland, among the 3 most densely populated countries in the world, uses over 15 times more land than lies within its political boundaries.

Certainly population increase is out of control, as measured by the carrying capacity of many countries. Rwanda and the rest of Africa are just representative of a global problem.

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### Reference

1. Wachernagel M, Rees WE. *Our ecological footprint: reducing human impact on the earth*. Gabriola Island (BC): New Society Publishers; 1996.

### CMAJ index

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