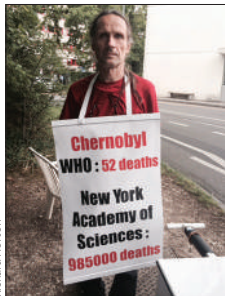


Offline: The day Bill Gates crossed the road



Richard Horton

It began on April 26, 2007, the 21st anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster. Five days a week for the past 7 years, from 8am until 6pm, a person stands silently outside WHO. On the corner of Route des Morillons and Avenue Appia, he or she holds a sign around their neck. One reads: "Chernobyl. WHO: 52 deaths. New York Academy of Sciences: 985 000 deaths." It is a vigil that protests WHO's alleged indifference to the truth of what its critics consider nothing less than a crime. For visitors to WHO, the demonstration is often their first sight as they walk up the hill from Geneva's city centre. One might judge the protestors eccentrics. A "here today, gone tomorrow" picket that is the product of some mad, grand conspiracy theory about the industrial-military complex and WHO's complicity and collusion.



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Though a tempting conclusion, it would be the wrong conclusion. The protest has several concrete objectives that are not at all the rantings of mavericks. The first is to reinstate WHO's Health and Radiation Department to "recruit independent and internationally recognised experts to lead and coordinate responses to public health disasters such as Chernobyl and Fukushima." Another is "To take immediate action, in collaboration with appropriately qualified partners including the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), to ensure that medical care, treatment, and adequate radioprotection are provided to populations in the affected areas." The protestors believe that the official figure cited for Chernobyl-related deaths (fewer than 60) is wrong. The infamous 2009 Volume 1181 of the *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, in which the total number of deaths between 1986 and 2004 was put at 985 000, is bitterly contested. Go to the Academy's website and you will find an extraordinary disclaimer. The Academy says it neither commissioned this work nor had the final papers peer-reviewed. The website sends readers to commentaries that say the figures reported in 2009 are "poorly substantiated" overestimates. Articles in other reputable journals, such as the *Journal of Radiological Protection*, have concluded that the published "erroneous approach [in the *Annals*] resulted in the overestimation of the number of accident victims by more than 800 000 deaths during 1987-2004." The WHO protestors certainly prefer to



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believe the *Annals* figure. But they recognise this question is a matter for serious scientific deliberation. They call on WHO, "To establish a Commission on Radiation and Health made up of independent experts to undertake a scientific study of the health consequences of the accident at Chernobyl, including all studies undertaken by independent researchers, having no connections, financial or otherwise, to the nuclear industry or associated bodies, and to report their findings to the World Health Assembly organised by WHO." The protestors say that WHO is compromised by a 1959 agreement with the International Atomic Energy Agency, whose purpose is to promote nuclear technologies, which prevents either organisation from harming the interests of the other. The IndependentWHO website claims that, "WHO is failing in its duty to protect those populations who are victims of radioactive contamination." I asked one protester last week if WHO had ever taken his concerns seriously. He told me that protestors had been invited to meet the current Director-General of WHO, Dr Margaret Chan. They put their evidence to her and, according to the man I spoke with, she expressed considerable sympathy for their views. The protestors say Dr Chan agreed the officially quoted number of deaths from the Chernobyl disaster was likely to be an underestimate. Still, nothing has materially changed in WHO's position.

The dignified presence of these protestors outside WHO, their peaceful and quiet persistence, and their reasoned position command not only interest from visitors, but also respect. On one occasion, Bill Gates was intrigued by the vigil. He crossed the road from WHO and shook a protestor's hand, apparently wishing him well. The man, armed with his placard, thanked him. He had no idea who he was. But Bill Gates took away the message, as many thousands who walk or ride pass WHO surely do—that when it comes to Chernobyl and Fukushima and the threat of radioactive contamination, the truth may not have been fully told. And WHO has a responsibility to get to that truth, however uncomfortable it might be for member-states or related agencies.

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