

Control births, feed and teach the living

The problem is people and the solution is money for family planning programs, writes **Kris Spike**.

ON Monday we will mark the entry into the world of the seventh billionth person. In reality it may have been a few days ago or be coming up next week, but for the purposes of marking the occasion it makes sense to pick the most likely day and run with it.

Naturally the event will spark a host of conversations and questions all over the world, and responses will range from concern to celebration to indifference.

Many people just won't be sure what to make of it as they listen to one expert telling us that we have the capacity for double that number and another equally qualified expert telling us that we should have stopped at 2 billion because that is all the Earth can sustain in the long run.

It raises the question of how do we deal with all the uncertainty that surrounds our unstoppable march into the future.

We will hear about predictions, revised predictions and accusations of flawed predictions. The reality is that there is just so much that we don't know about the future that our models can only be of limited value.

This then raises the question of what we should do in the face of such uncertainty.

Uncertainty is usually a signal to act with caution, but you could hardly call adding another 3 billion (the United Nations' best guess) a cautious path to take.

Should we try to control the future or should we just let it happen?

The truth is that humans have been trying to control their future ever since we evolved the intelligence to realise we could. We have dispatched our predators, conquered many diseases, increased our food supply and taken advantage of fossil fuels to help spread ourselves around the planet.

The growth in our numbers has been spectacular and people can mostly expect to live long and productive lives, depending on which country they are born into.

To claim that we should use our



SAD CITY: An aerial view of part of Kenya's Dadaab refugee camp, built in 1990 for 90,000, now housing 360,000.

intelligence to negate all the things that used to keep our numbers in check (famine, disease, predators, high infant mortality) but then remain hands off when our numbers begin to upset the natural balance that has allowed our remarkable progress to date, would seem rather hypocritical.

If we accept that it is appropriate to have some control over just how many humans will walk this Earth in the future, the big questions are how many and who will decide.

At the moment some countries leave it up to individual couples to decide family size, while others consider it appropriate to try to influence this decision by rewarding or penalising parents for the number of children they have.

On a world scale this system clearly amounts to no one being in control and global population growth being something we are mere spectators to.

Possibly the one thing we can all

agree on is the fact that no one wants the world's population to grow so large that we have difficulty in providing people with all the essentials of a dignified life (some would argue we are having trouble already).

No sane person would wish for a future plagued by food insecurity, water stresses, conflict over diminishing resources or a natural world that has only a fraction of the biodiversity that it once had.

This may be a real prospect if the worldwide birth rate (the average number of children that a woman will have in her lifetime) does not fall to 2.1.

The good news is that when women are given an education and access to family planning, the birth rate usually falls to around this number.

While it is hard to imagine that any one body will ever be in a position of such power as to be able to control the size of the world's population, it is conceivable that an

organisation like the United Nations may be granted the power to direct member countries to allocate a certain percentage of their foreign aid budgets to family planning programs that give women all over the world the ability to avoid unplanned pregnancies.

This should appeal to pro-life and pro-choice advocates alike, as the correct use of contraception avoids the need for abortion.

Doubtless, such a plan would have many vociferous opponents foaming at the mouth screaming wild accusations of Big Brother tactics and cultural imperialism, but we can always fend them off with a question.

Do you have a better plan to avoid a global overpopulation crisis?

Kris Spike is the NSW branch president of Sustainable Population Australia.

Longer life demands longer health, wealth

Society will have to plan if it's to have 150-year-olds, writes **Peter Smith**.

THE existence of a fountain of youth that restores the health and youth of anyone bathing in its waters has tantalised humanity for centuries.

Substitute the mythical water for modern-day medicine and we could, in the next decade, see medicines that slow the ageing process and help us live to 150 years old.

Life expectancy in Australia is already on a positive trend.

At the beginning of the 20th century, life expectancy at birth was approximately 55 years for males and 59 years for females.

A girl born today in Australia could reasonably expect to live to 100 due to advances in medicine, lifestyle and public health initiatives.

To further these advancements, plant-derived compounds such as resveratrol have been shown to activate enzymes in mice that trigger their bodies' DNA repair process.

Those enzymes exist in human bodies, too, so drugs that slow the ageing process are a possibility. Synthetic molecules 1000 times more potent than resveratrol are in clinical trials for diseases of ageing, and are showing early signs of efficacy.

Biotechnology is another popular area of research. Gene testing is already helping us identify rare genetic disorders such as cystic fibrosis and Huntington's disease.

In the future, gene tests may become readily available to understand our health and life expectancy without medical intervention. Gene therapy may then be used for treating, or even curing, genetic and acquired

diseases such as cancer and AIDS by using normal genes to supplement or replace defective genes or to bolster a normal function such as immunity. If the science is available then people will use it.

Living to ages unattainable today will be possible in the near future, whether it's via medicines, biotechnology or even stem cell therapy. However, we must also consider the social and economic implications for extended life.

People aren't going to want to retire at 65 and spend many decades sitting at home. Indeed, a life expectancy of 150 would make retirement at 65 rare, with many people likely to choose a second career that is more knowledge based.

A bloated working population may increase unemployment figures, especially in lower socio-economic groups, while the young might have an extended adolescence up to 30

years old before moving out of the family home (some would argue this is already occurring). But this assumes that extended life also means healthy life.

One of the challenges in ageing populations is dementia, such as Alzheimer's, that is seemingly unavoidable in the elderly. Rates of dementia in Australia are already expected to increase threefold by 2050 to one million Australians; that will have a major impact on government health expenditure.

Science research needs to ensure we live happy and healthy lives; otherwise the social and economic implications could potentially be catastrophic.

Professor Peter Smith is dean of medicine at the University of New South Wales.



Waterfront woes

HUNTER businessman Jeff McCloy said he would mount a class action against Lake Macquarie City Council for devaluing waterfront properties with its climate change policy. More than 100 online readers had their say about the issue as well.

Brilliant. About time someone spoke up about this climate change rot. I own a waterfront property on Lake Macquarie - count me in.

robert

As a business leader Jeff McCloy should be more focused on what he can do to lead the effort on the real problems of climate change - how we can all reduce the damage we cause, and how to manage threats to our and children's future way of life.

Andrew James

Jeff is right, the last theoretical modelling NCC did prior to the Pasha storm proved useless when reality struck . . . The real issue is that councils are just covering their butts.

Frank

It's actions like this that just turn litigation into a raffle for the rich.

Lionel Hutz

A millionaire is going to sue a council. I wonder who is going to have to pay that bill? I'll give you a hint. Starts with "R" and ends with "atepayers".

Mitch in Lake Mack

Would be nice to see some class action taken against every inappropriate development developers have made fortunes from. Suck it up, Jeff.

judgedredd

I am more concerned about dropping property values around Newcastle if coal loading facilities continue to expand.

Immediate Concerns

My violin is playing . . .

what the?

Finally someone is standing up to all this false carbon garbage.

Carbon Lies

ONLINE poll



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