Globethics Repository



[Book Review] The energy glut. The politics of fatness in an overheating world by Ian Roberts, Phil Edwards

This page was generated automatically upon download from the Globethics Repository. More information on Globethics see https://www.globethics.net. Data and content policy of Globethics Repository see https://repository.globethics.net/pages/policy.

Item Type	Article
Authors	Tetali, Shailaja
Publisher	Forum for Medical Ethics Society
Rights	With permission of the license/copyright holder
Download date	2026-11-13 00:19:54
Link to Item	http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12424/186266

Too much energy

SHAILAJA TETALI

Assistant Professor, Indian Institute of Public Health, Hyderabad 500033 INDIA e-mail: shailaja.t@iiphh.org

Ian Roberts, Phil Edwards. *The energy glut. The politics of fatness in an overheating world.* London and New York: Zed Books Ltd; 2010. Pp 182 ISBN 978 1 84813 518 5 £14.99.

The energy glut is a gripping story of energy and the inescapable link between fatness among people, road danger, and an over-heating world, with cheap petroleum linking them. "Worldwide, over a billion people are overweight, and people in many countries are getting fatter. The threat of global warming is at its highest and fossil fuels are the cause of both." But what is the connection with public health ethics?

With a combined research experience of over 40 years in road safety issues, the authors are senior academicians at a prestigious public health school. They compare road traffic injuries to nested Russian dolls, where the innermost and smallest doll is the injured, and the outer layers of dolls are the causes. The outermost layer, which is the ubiquitous petroleum, is the cause of obesity, climate change and road injuries. The authors argue that the increasing level of obesity is not a personal failing, but our response to a flawed environment. Because of petrol-powered transportation and consequent road danger, our active movement has plummeted. "We are, therefore, walking and cycling less than ever before in history." This, combined with hoardings luring us to buy more energy dense food, is a lethal combination.

The book is refreshingly honest, and the chapters delightfully simple. Conclusions are derived logically from well-organised evidence. The authors skilfully weave in humour, along with poignant reminders that the real cost of petrol is much higher than what we pay at the pumps - if we consider the social cost of war and lives lost. The book ends on a positive note, by exhorting us to reclaim our streets and neighbourhoods. It suggests renovating our towns and cities for active movement, especially since the average commuting trips for most people are less than 5 kilometres in a day. The book persuades us to consider walking or cycling to work, to integrate the need for transport and physical activity. The authors themselves cycle to work- an hour each way- thus increasing the credibility of their arguments. But the setting is mainly urban European, and it seems to assume certain pre-conditions; the presence of sidewalks, bicycle lanes, or at least non-mixing of low and high speed vehicles on the roads, not to mention fairly cooperative weather. What does it mean for us in India? How easy is it to walk or cycle in 45 degrees Celsius heat, with different vehicles competing for the same narrow road space?

There are other issues on Indian roads that the authors may not be aware of. Being the second biggest manufacturer of two wheelers and one of the fastest growing automobile manufacturers in the world, India cannot be ignored. The country is projected to have the largest number of cars in the world by 2050, 382 cars/1000 people, compared to about 7/1000 currently. The automobile companies are successfully selling the dream of car ownership, colluding with finance companies doling out generous loans, and happy with government policies that favour the private transport user. With chronic diseases on the rise, doctors advise vigourous physical activity but people are frustrated at the lack of an enabling environment like pavements and parks. As a result, the rich go to the gym, and most other people withdraw from the streets and from any active movement altogether. Those who do not have a choice, continue to walk and cycle, and get killed or injured or disabled by the lethal machines called automobiles, on our merciless roads.

The book points out that the transportation costs of transnational trade are deliberately kept low by governments with vested interests. Tax-payers are bearing the brunt, while large businesses are benefiting by internalising the profits and externalising their costs. This story of energy is a compelling reminder that too much energy- both through high calorie foods and transportation fuels- is robbing us of the active movement that human beings are designed for.

I would recommend this book to a wide audience: school teachers concerned about their pupils' safety, parents worried about their children, professionals, doctors, policy makers and road users. As a researcher, a mother, and a vulnerable road user, *The energy glut* has had a profound influence on me. I realised that obesity, climate change, and road safety are political issues. Certain groups of people have made decisions that determine how much or how little we move our bodies and what and how much we eat. In my view, it is a violation of public health ethics, both at an individual and at a population level.