

Cancer, Climate and Corona: Priorities in times of crisis

When Ms Dinkel discovered the blood, she realized something was wrong. She was in her early 60s, way past her menopause. But she did not go to see her gynecologist right away. She was busy at work and undergoing a complicated dental restoration. Another problem felt like too much stress, she told her colleague who urged her to seek care – and she postponed until the teeth were fixed. One year later, that colleague stood at her grave. Her teeth were perfectly fine. But the cancer had already metastasized when she finally paid attention to it.

This is a true story from which we can learn about priorities. There are many issues and problems in life, some are acute and loud, others chronic and silent. And some are of a fundamental nature, a precondition of everything else. Like health for an individual. And like the climate for humanity. Many have understood that climate change is a problem. But few have understood that it is not a problem like any other. That a stable climate is the foundation for life on earth as we know it and that everything else, our society, our economy, depend on it. That we cannot take care of this issue some point later when we have solved the other problems because it will be too late then.

We do not know exactly when a certain cancer will metastasize, but we know that the risk rises substantially the larger the tumor grows. Any postponement of an operation increases the risk. The same goes for the climate. We do not know what exactly will happen when, but we do know that the risk for irreversible damage increases massively beyond 1.5°C global warming and that there are dangerous tipping points in the earth system. Which is why the central goal of the Paris Climate Agreement is to limit global warming to well under 2°C, aiming for 1.5°C. To still achieve that, we need to turn the tide very soon. Further postponement is unforgivable, as with cancer treatment. Health is at stake and the lives of our children and grand-children and all future generations.

In an emergency recognized as such, priorities completely shift. When receiving a cancer diagnosis, everything else in life moves to the background and is re-evaluated; holidays, job, dental restoration. Things that were of great importance before are being postponed or cancelled. During the Corona crisis we experienced what it is like when a society acts decisively in an emergency. Existing rules are suspended, new ones emerge. We do not shy away from costs. In relation to the climate crisis, however, there is no common understanding yet that we are dealing with an emergency. It has no priority yet. There is a lot of talk, but action is half-hearted. We fear side effects. And fail to have an effect. In radiation therapy, if you only accept a tenth of the required dose, you can prevent hair loss, but you will not get rid of the tumor.

And yet the “therapy” of the climate crisis would be far less uncomfortable than treating cancer or the Corona pandemic. It rather resembles a withdrawal, as from nicotine or alcohol, tough at first, but once you are over it, you actually feel better. In a world without burning coal and oil, with fewer cars, with pedestrian- and bike-friendly cities, we could breathe clean air, exercise more, be more healthy. The economic stimulus packages for coping with the Corona crisis are a unique opportunity to rebuild our economy and society in a sustainable way, to reorient ourselves. We should not waste it. Protecting the foundation for life on Earth should be our top priority. This does not mean that everything else does not matter any more. But if we neglect the climate crisis, everything else will become obsolete. And one day we will stand in front of the ruins of our civilisation and ask ourselves why we did not act decisively when there still was time.