

Michael Specter

Interviewed by Joelle Seligson

The science writer and ASTC 2011 speaker on denialism, vaccine phobia, and why organic food won't save the world

In the face of today's massive organic movement, Michael Specter lauds synthetic drugs and genetically modified foods. Specter, staff writer at the *New Yorker* and author of the 2009 book *Denialism: How Irrational Thinking Hinders Scientific Progress, Harms the Planet, and Threatens Our Lives*, does not factor political correctness into his crusade to conquer fear with facts.

Here's a taste of what he'll discuss as a featured speaker at the 2011 ASTC Annual Conference in Baltimore, hosted by the Maryland Science Center, October 15–18 (conference.astc.org).

Aren't we supposed to "go organic"?

Is that written down somewhere?... I buy [organic food] because it tastes good. I buy it because I'm a rich Western person. I don't think it's going to be very useful to a lot of people who have no protein and are going to bed hungry every night.

But what about the stories of people who have gotten sick from pesticides or new vaccines?

Aren't we better safe than sorry?

Yeah, we are better safe than sorry, and if we choose not to vaccinate ourselves, then hundreds of millions of people can die... So, you don't want to vaccinate your kid? It's fine with me; just keep your kid away from my kid.

What is "denialism"?

Denialism is a refusal to accept factual reality and a clinging to beliefs that make you feel more comfortable in the face of lots of evidence to the contrary. It's hurting science and our lives in any number of ways. California just had the biggest pertussis [whooping cough] outbreak in 70 years... We have a measles outbreak now in Minnesota. We will have more. This is because people are afraid of a measure that is unarguably one of the safest and most effective in the history of medicine.



How do you think this phenomenon affects science centers and museums?

It's hard to educate the public about science when people don't want to listen to the facts. [That's] why we live in a country where 40% of people say they won't vaccinate their children and get the flu shot—and where about the same number say they don't believe in evolution.

How could science centers and museums help?

Let people know that measles killed 150,000 people in the world last year...or that, in this country, polio was a very serious illness that frightened us all until just a couple generations ago. These things are gone now, essentially. We don't think about them because vaccines have been so effective. Museums can show us [that].

Is this what you're planning to tell attendees of the ASTC Annual Conference?

I might want to talk about what they could do differently that they're not doing now. But I want to save a little bit for the speech.