

ABIC 2010 kicks off - speaker urges audience to keep an open mind

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Be skeptical of what you believe to be true. That was the take home message for the 150 delegates and members of the public attending the public forum opening the ABIC 2010 conference in Saskatoon.



The message was delivered by well known broadcaster and science writer Jay Ingram, currently co-host of Discovery Channel's Daily Planet. Playing off the name of Al Gore's documentary on climate change, "An Inconvenient Truth" Ingram's talk was entitled "Truth, an Inconvenience" and focused on how difficult it can be to have rationale discussions about scientific issues because everyone has their own bias and preconceived notions.

"Controversies that involve science, for example climate change or genetically modified organisms... it's not about the data, it's about social and cultural influences," said Ingram who added "We all fall prey to these

influences that quite often we're not aware of."

Ingram backed up his assertions by pointing to a battery of psychological studies that showed that people's beliefs are based in part on their own life experiences and on pure biology. He supported this argument by citing a U.S. research project that showed Republicans and Democrats had different kinds of brain activity when asked to do the same task.

"People look more critically at something they don't agree with and they want to believe what they already believe," he said. Ingram's message was particularly relevant to this conference that focuses on the sometimes controversial area of biotechnology and the businesses associated with it. Towards the end of his presentation he posed the big question that was hanging over the room, "If you want to convince people, what can you do?"





He argued that simply providing more scientific data is not enough. He suggested that you have to look for ways to provide the public with information from an unexpected source. He gave the example of a well known investment advisor who wrote a newsletter story about how global warming should influence investment decisions. The man was not a scientist and his story made no mention of scientific data but it provided his readers with information they could use.

He wrapped up by once again urging delegates to be conscious of their own biases and to keep an open mind.

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Director of the ABIC Foundation Jerome Konecni and Jay Ingram at TCU Place in Saskatoon