



Climate change is a health care issue

Climate change has been called the greatest global health threat of the 21st century. In the past year alone we witnessed the detrimental effects that flash floods, a heat dome, forest fires, and poor air quality had on our communities, our health, and our well-being. But what will it take for us to become more climate conscious and make permanent changes to the way we do things? First, we must acknowledge the magnitude of climate change and the magnitude of the related impacts on human health. Then we must increase our awareness about how we are affected and what we can do to help.

According to the World Health Organization, climate change is already impacting human health in many ways. Not only in the deaths and illnesses directly related to more frequent extreme weather events, but also in the devastating repercussions—disruptions to our food systems, increases in diseases carried by insects and animals, food- and waterborne diseases, and mental health issues. The impacts of climate change are also faced disproportionately by the most marginalized and vulnerable populations, including women, children, ethnic minorities, immigrants, displaced persons, aging populations, and people with underlying chronic health issues. On top of this, climate change will continue to undermine our ability to support the social determinants of health. We know that simple everyday actions can have a collective impact. We also know that in health care there is an immense opportunity for us to radically shift the way we do things to become more climate conscious and responsible. Did you know that prescribing dry-powder inhalers instead of metered-dose inhalers saves the equivalent of 150–400 kg of carbon dioxide

per year? The Canadian health care system ranks third highest in per capita greenhouse gas emissions and contributes 4% of Canada's total emissions. There is plenty of room for us to drastically reduce our carbon footprint and the negative impact it has on our planetary health. When it comes to our waste and paper consumption, could we not pivot away from the way we have always done something and instead make use of advances in technology and digital information sharing to lessen the burden on our environment? Imagine a health care commitment to our planet's sustainability and the impact it would have on human health. Imagine climate-conscious spaces, clinics, and hospitals with green spaces and clean air. Imagine finding new approaches to minimize our biohazardous waste and contemplate our energy sources.

I have had the opportunity to engage with some of our physicians dedicated to climate change and planetary health: Dr Warren Bell, founder of the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE); Dr Melissa Lem, president-elect of CAPE and founder and director of PaRx, Canada's national nature prescription program powered by the BC Parks Foundation; and Dr Douglas Courtemanche of Doctors for Planetary Health. Their outstanding contributions, expertise, and dedication to the betterment of our planet as physicians are awe-inspiring. My hope is that their fervor and calls to action for climate and planetary

emergencies can motivate all of us as individuals and as a profession.

As an organization, Doctors of BC recognizes the significant threat climate change poses to our collective health and safety and the valuable role physicians can play in communicating about these impacts. Last year we released our Climate Change and Human Health policy statement, which outlines our commitments and recommendations in support of climate change prevention, mitigation, and adaptation measures (www.doctorsofbc.ca/policy-database).

And in March 2022 we shared our Equitable Access to Green Spaces resolution, in which we support efforts to increase access to green spaces for all British Columbians.

As physicians, we are all leaders and trusted advocates for our patients and our communities. Now is the time to use this leadership to communicate about the health impacts of climate change, to contribute to short- and long-term strategies that reduce potential harms, and to actively make changes in the health care system for the good of our patients and our planet. ■

—Ramneek Dosanjh, MD
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