

Why physicians see climate change as a health emergency

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Words are important and should reflect the urgency of a situation. Therefore, the phenomenon of climate change is better understood as a climate crisis. And it's not just another "issue," but rather an emergency, says AMA member Jonathan Patz, MD, MPH.

"Solving the global climate crisis could be the greatest opportunity of our time," said Dr. Patz, director of the University of Wisconsin's Global Health Institute, during a grand-rounds program at the AMA headquarters in Chicago. He added that three ways to attack global warming—reducing air pollution, eating less meat and driving less—all have tremendous health benefits.

"This is the largest environmental public health threat we face," said Dr. Patz. "That's why I dedicated my career to this."

For a decade and a half, Dr. Patz served as a lead author for the U.N. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (or IPCC)—the organization that shared the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize with Al Gore.

AMA policy on global climate change and human health backs the IPCC's findings and "supports educating the medical community on the potential adverse public health effects of global climate change and incorporating the health implications of climate change into the spectrum of medical education, including topics such as population displacement, heat waves and drought, flooding, infectious and vector-borne diseases, and potable water supplies."

Early warnings given, criticized

Dr. Patz, in 1994, convened the first-ever session on climate change for the American Public Health Association and was the lead author of "Global Climate Change and Emerging Infectious Diseases," published by JAMA in 1996.

The report was immediately met by skeptics who disputed his analysis on the link between climate change and certain health ailments. One respondent even cited a paper entitled “Why Global Warming Would Be Good for You” as a reference.

For today’s skeptics, Dr. Patz argues that the strategies for fighting climate change also work for improving health.

“Regardless of one’s views on climate change science—even for deniers—all of us can support clean air from low-carbon energy,” said Dr. Patz, who is board certified in occupational and environmental medicine, and family medicine. “Climate change is a health issue, and a low-carbon society offers enormous health opportunities.”

He cited research showing that investing \$30 in the technology needed to reduce one ton of carbon dioxide emissions produces \$200 in health cost savings.

Overwhelming impact

Co-presenter Renee N. Salas, MD, MPH, with the Harvard Global Health Institute, noted that combating the negative health impact of the climate change aligns with AMA’s strategic objectives.

For example, the AMA seeks to remove obstacles interfering with patient care, and climate change creates obstacles. This includes disruption to the health care supply chain that occurred when Hurricane Maria struck drug and device manufacturing facilities in Puerto Rico.

The AMA leads the charge to prevent chronic disease while the heat waves, fires and floods caused by climate change amplify and multiply the threats to health posed by chronic disease.

While the AMA confronts public health crises, Dr. Salas said the climate crisis is disrupting and overwhelming our public health infrastructure and increasing the potential for food contamination and mosquito-borne diseases.

The AMA is among more than 100 health organizations that signed the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health’s Climate, Health and Equity Policy Action Agenda. Among other things, the organizations are urging “government, business and civil society leaders, elected officials and candidates for office to recognize climate change as a health emergency.”

“Critical window” still open

Dr. Salas was the lead author of the “Brief for the United States of America,” which presents U.S. data from “The 2018 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: shaping the health of nations for centuries to come,” published in *The Lancet* in December 2018. The global report tracks 41 indicators and assessed the impacts of the crisis and opportunities for change. She is also serving as the lead author of this year’s U.S. brief.

“The goal in 2019 is to further reinforce that this is a health emergency,” she said. “This is impacting health and our ability to deliver care—end of story.”

An emergency physician, she compared the state of the planet to the “critical window” during which an intervention can still save a gravely ill patient’s life.

“We are the first individuals on Earth to experience daily the effects of the climate crisis,” Dr. Salas said. “We are the last to be able to change the course.”