Climate change represents a significant public health threat and harms individual patients, driving up rates of allergies, asthma, and respiratory and cardiovascular disease—and it is time for policymakers and health care organizations to act accordingly, says an AMA Council on Science and Public Health report whose recommendations were adopted at the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting in Honolulu.

“Scientific evidence continues to show the significant public health threat that climate change represents. Physicians are already seeing firsthand the adverse impact of climate change on the health of their patients,” said AMA Trustee Drayton Charles Harvey. He is a dual-degree MD-PhD candidate at the University of Southern California Keck School of Medicine and the California Institute of Technology.

“This is an existential threat. We must continue to do everything we can to combat the climate crisis and act now to prevent catastrophic levels of global warming,” Harvey added. “Physicians pledge to do no harm, and now it is time for the health sector to do the same by joining forces to commit to decarbonization and public health.”

Ambitious aims

Climate change contributes to injuries and premature deaths related to extreme weather events as well as heat-related deaths due to continued warming. In addition, climate change impacts changes in the prevalence and geographical distribution of food- and water-borne illnesses and other infectious diseases, says the AMA council’s report.

Having declared climate change a public health crisis in June, the AMA House of Delegates added to existing policy a goal to “reduce U.S. greenhouse gas emissions aimed at a 50% reduction in emissions by 2030” with existing policy calling for carbon neutrality by 2050.

The delegates also modified policy for the AMA to:
Consider signing on to the Department of Health and Human Services Health and Human Services Health Care Pledge or making a similar commitment to lower its own greenhouse gas emissions.

Encourage the health sector to lead by example in committing to carbon neutrality by 2050.

The delegates also modified a separate policy on global climate change and human health to:

- Recognize that these climate changes have adversely affected the physical and mental health of people.
- Recognize that minoritized and marginalized populations, children, pregnant people, older adults, rural communities and those who are economically disadvantaged will suffer disproportionate harms from climate change.
- Encourage physicians to assist in educating patients and the public on the physical and mental health effects of climate change and on environmentally sustainable practices, and to serve as role models for promoting environmental sustainability.
- Encourage physicians to work with health departments to strengthen the public health infrastructure to ensure that the global health effects of climate change can be anticipated and responded to more efficiently, and that adaptation interventions are equitable and prioritize the needs of the populations most at risk.

Read about the other highlights from the 2022 AMA Interim Meeting.