

Global Climate Change and Public Health

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by
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Paris | Today alongside COP21 a consortium of medical and health care agencies came together for an international symposium of doctors and medical professionals at the sprawling Georges Pompidou European Hospital. Their purpose was to identify the requirements for a more climate resilient health care system, to reduce the carbon footprint of medical facilities, and to develop medical leadership on policies and economic solutions toward a healthy climate.

This symposium began by declaring "Climate change is now upon us." This is a crucial time because an environmental health crisis is now growing everywhere around the world. As carbon dioxide continues to rise in the atmosphere and oceans, there will be growing impacts upon public health.

"It is increasingly clear," said [Dr. Josh Karliner, MD](#), director of global projects for Health Care without Harm, "fossil fuel combustion is the key driver of climate change and that there is a growing imperative for the world to transition to clean, renewable, healthy energy as central to a solution."

It is also clear, he added, that "health care must play a leading role in addressing this emerging crisis."

"Fossil fuels make a major contribution to air pollution, which according to the World Health Organization, killed seven million people in 2012; more than double the toll of all AIDS, malaria and TB combined."

On top of this fossil fuels are already "exacerbating a wide range of health problems, including asthma, heart disease, heat stroke, and the spread of infectious diseases like malaria and dengue, plus a variety of water borne diseases like diarrhea and cholera.

"Globally the health impacts of fossil fuels are driving up health care costs, threatening the long-term viability of many public health gains, as well as entire health care systems, and thereby quickly becoming what the 2015 Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change has named "a global health emergency."

Unchecked, climate change will threaten the food and water supply in many parts of the world, potentially triggering massive public health crises. If atmospheric greenhouse gases continue to rise unabated, climate change will trigger a massive flow of refugees in many parts of the world, cause greater political instability, conflict and violent extremism.

"At a moment when such extremism has reared its ugly head here in Paris, it becomes even more imperative to combat climate change in order to build a more peaceful and just world...."

Over twenty medical doctors and health professionals provided a range of perspectives and recommendations on the role of health care in this emerging global crisis.

[Dr. Laurent Setton, MD,](#)

the French director general of Social Ministries, discussed hospital management and the responsibility to model the best in sustainable development. Hospitals must become alert to their carbon footprint; staff must be trained to seek a carbon neutral use of energy. Hospitals must meet ecological and energy efficiency standards. Every stage of the medical practice must use recycled products. Across France the average hospital bed contributes about a ton of waste material annually. About 15% of French energy use goes into the health care sector.

[Dr. Gerard Vincent MD,](#)

noted that 85% of French hospitals already support sustainable development goals.

Dr. Josh Karliner, MD,

from the University of San Francisco School of Medicine, said that we need to transform the health care system. Climate change, he emphasized, "is the greatest challenge of our time." It will cause increased levels of violence, refugees, extremism, political and social instability as well as disease. Hospitals and medical professionals will need to set an example of moving away from fossil fuels. They are now a vector for instability around the world. Hospitals will need to use clean renewable sources of energy.

Dr. Gary Cohen, MD,

President of Health Care without Harm, Boston, Massachusetts, introduced his presentation by declaring, "Climate Change is the biggest health threat of the 21st century." He provided a long series of graphic images to explain how climate change is manifesting now. His research has shown that most people will experience climate change as a health issue. He provided a long list of ways that this will manifest, including:

- * Extreme weather-related injuries
- * Aggregation of chronic diseases
- * Infectious diseases - zoonotic, water-borne and food-borne diseases
- * Aggravation of asthma, respiratory allergies, and chronic respiratory diseases....

These are the new realities of the modern world.

Historically the U.S. has been the major emitter of greenhouse gases, but the impact is manifesting first across Africa and Southeast Asia. We cannot deny our global responsibility.... Already at least seven million people die annually from the consequences of fossil fuels. The tragedy is that these fossil fuel induced diseases remain subsidized by governments....

These companies operate in the global commons without any moral compass. ExxonMobil, for instance, knew the global implications of wide fossil fuel usage over twenty years ago. In their calculation health care and disease were merely externalities to fossil fuel use.

The choices that we make in just the next ten years will determine the future of the world. This transition away from fossil fuels and toward clean sources of energy will represent the largest social transformation in the history of civilization.

To aid this transition, the health care system must be mobilized to address this most profound crisis. Three changes must be incorporated into medical practice:

- * It must reduce its carbon footprint and provide an example for society
- * It must improve its resilience from the impacts of climate change. (Hospitals, for instance, in New Orleans and New York City could not operate after they were disabled by hurricanes)
- * It must begin to advocate for appropriate national practices and policies. This means it should take on a role as messengers about climate change in the public sphere.

Health care is not yet prepared for climate change. A huge period of learning and adaptation lie ahead as the impacts of climate change are only in their infancy.

As part of our example we as medical professionals must divest from fossil fuels. Divestment removes our moral approval of the actions that are destroying health and welfare. By these actions we are expanding the mission for health care in society.

In the U.S. we should be committing to a 50% reduction in fossil fuel use by 2025. For perspective Sweden in the Skane region, at a far northern latitude, is promising to become 100% fossil fuel free by 2025.

We might also consider promoting policies of turning swords into windmills. All of this is foreseeing and describing a broader mission for health care in the very near future.

[Herr Christian Dreissgacker](#), CEO of Vivantes Hospital, Berlin, Germany, discussed new dimensions to hospital management. All of the concepts implied in sustainable development

have to be brought into hospital management now. Nations must avoid private for-profit hospitals and emphasize publicly-owned hospitals as these latter will be far better at addressing and serving the public good.

[Ms. Brenna Davis,](#)

Seattle, Washington, runs a series of hospitals in the U.S. Pacific Northwest. She operates one of the first carbon neutral hospitals in the US. She says that we need to place a price on carbon. This will accelerate the transition away from fossil fuels and into clean sources of energy.

[Dr Mohammed Ahmed Idhammad, MD,](#)

Marrakesh, Morocco, reported that his country is already experiencing stronger storms than ever before. His government knows this is only the beginning, and that they must prepare for even stronger and more intense storm levels as CO2 levels continue to rise.

His region of Morocco has a big advantage as it enjoys 300 sunny days per year. They will emphasize solar power and seek energy independence in the next four years – by 2019. Already all of the hospitals in Morocco are learning how to implement sustainable development.

[Dr. Kristina De Geer, MD,](#)

Skane, Sweden, described how her region will become fossil fuel free by 2020. Even though they are in the far North of Europe, she showed a photo of her hospital: the entire roof was covered with solar panels. She declared that her hospital already produces more energy than they consume. It only requires intentionality, she said, to make the transition to clean sources of energy.

[Dr. Jeffrey Thompson, MD,](#)

from Madison, Wisconsin, related his experience in treating patients. He listed a variety of conditions which are triggered from fossil fuel emissions. He cited a report from the U.S. Dept of Energy which reported that hospitals use more than twice as much energy per square foot as other commercial buildings. This, he says, can be changed with forethought and intentionality.

We have a moral imperative to address the forces leading to dangerous climate change. He added a personal note. "What will you say to your children? What will you say to the next generation when the ravages of

climate change really begin to hit? Because we now know the severity of the problem that we face, we have a moral responsibility to teach and to act in ways that reduce our carbon footprint and provide for clean alternative ways of developing and using energy.

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There were a lot of implications about these closing questions.... Then at 1:20 PM, we broke for lunch. The conference continued, but at this point I had to leave for another appointment.