

Climate Change and Human Health

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Doctors of BC Position

Doctors of BC recognizes the significant impact climate change can have on human health and the need for everyone to work to reduce the rate at which climate change occurs. To support mitigation and adaptation measures to reduce the impact of climate change on human health, Doctors of BC commits to:

- Reducing our carbon footprint as an organization.
- Supporting BC physicians to improve sustainability in their practices through quality improvement projects, and to spread and scale up successful quality initiatives that generate outcomes such as limiting waste, improving the use of resources, and limiting the carbon footprint of the workplace.
- Working with continuing medical education organizations to promote training in emergency preparedness planning for physicians.

Doctors of BC recommends that:

- Efforts of the Canadian Medical Association and BC Government to reduce the healthcare sectors' greenhouse gas emissions be sustained and expanded wherever possible.
- Health emergency management and planning activities integrate physician perspectives to ensure physicians are well positioned to provide care during climate-related events.
- Health impact assessments be required in connection with all proposed projects and programs that have the potential to alter the environment to ensure mitigation of potential risks to human health.

Background

Climate change refers to “a change in climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods.”(1) These changes have the potential to affect every aspect of human life, including our health.

Climate change is already impacting BC. Historical data from 1900 to 2013 shows that the average annual temperature has increased by 1.4°C, annual precipitation has increased, average sea levels have risen, and ice on lakes and rivers melts earlier.(2)

Climate change can result in reduced air quality, water- and food-borne contamination, increased exposure to ultraviolet rays, and vector-borne and zoonotic disease. Some of the direct health impacts associated with these changes include respiratory and cardiovascular illness, cancer, infectious disease, disturbed immune function, and mental health conditions among others.(3)(4) Indirect health impacts can include increased occupational health risks, population displacement and conflict, and increased exposure to air pollutants, among others.(5)

To the extent British Columbians experience more intense and frequent extreme weather events such as flooding, water shortages, storm surges, heat

waves, wildfires, and vector-borne disease, there is likely to be associated increased loss of life, morbidity, injury, disease, and/or hospitalizations.(6)

To reduce the impacts of climate change on human health, there is a need to reduce the rate at which climate change occurs through preventive measures, such as reducing greenhouse gas emissions, and to adapt to the effects of climate change on human health that are already occurring.

Analysis

Mitigation

Greenhouse gases resulting from the use of fossil fuels are the most significant contributor to climate change. Globally, the Canadian healthcare system ranks third-highest in terms of per capita greenhouse gas emissions and contributes 4% of Canada's total emissions.(7)

Many parts of the healthcare system are already actively working to reduce contributors to climate change. In BC, the *Carbon Neutral Government Regulation* under the *Climate Change Accountability Act* requires all public sector organizations, including health authorities, to take steps to ensure they are carbon neutral.(8)

At the national level, the Canadian Medical Association has been a leader in increasing public awareness of the impacts of climate change on human health and advocating for policy change. Doctors of BC applauds these efforts and supports the ongoing work to reduce greenhouse gas emissions across the healthcare sector.

In line with these efforts, Doctors of BC is also actively working to reduce the carbon footprint of the organization through a range of actions, including reducing energy usage, water and other materials, providing staff training and education on environmental sustainability, and ensuring

environmentally and socially sustainable product procurement.

In addition to these systems level efforts, many physicians are involved in a range of activities to address climate change and promote awareness of the human health impacts of climate change. Doctors of BC supports these activities through the Joint Collaborative Committees where physicians can access quality improvement (QI) funding to improve sustainability in their practices. One example of where this has occurred is through Facility Engagement, an initiative of the Specialist Services Committee, where funding is available to physicians to engage in quality improvement projects related to sustainability. The outcomes from one completed project at Kelowna General Hospital included limiting waste, improving the use of resources, and limiting the carbon footprint of the workplace.(9)

Doctors of BC is committed to supporting physicians to make changes to improve sustainability in their practices, and to working with physicians to spread and scale up successful quality initiatives.

Adaptation

Doctors of BC recognizes that, despite prevention efforts, British Columbians are already feeling the impacts of climate change. A range of strategies and tools are needed to reduce the health harms associated with climate change. Physicians can play a valuable role in communicating the population health impacts of climate change, as well as contributing to strategies to reduce potential harms.

Physicians are often required to provide care to patients during and after climate-related disasters. It is, therefore, critically important to incorporate physicians' experiences and perspectives into health emergency management planning. Doctors of BC supports public health work focused on

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enhancing community capacity and building community resilience to reduce the health impact of emergencies on British Columbians. In addition to those efforts, physicians should be incorporated into planning and preparedness at the individual, community, and systems level in order to build physician capacity to respond in the event of an emergency. Additionally, continuing medical education organizations should promote training in emergency preparedness for physicians to help physicians manage the health impacts of climate change.(10)

Prior to the development of new policies, projects, and programs it is important to identify and consider potential health impacts. Health impact assessments are a tool that can be used to understand the potential health effects, and make recommendations to maximize potential positive health impacts and reduce health risks.(11)

Because climate change is already occurring, health impact assessments are an important tool to help predict the increasingly complex interactions between the environment and human health. Doctors of BC has historically advocated for and continues to believe that potential health impacts should be a key consideration in the development of new policies, projects or programs in order to better understand potential impacts on human health and to develop adaptation strategies to reduce any significant health risks.

References

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History

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

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