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HEALTH DAY AT COP 16

Doctors say: Don't forget the health dividend

The "Cancun Climate and Health Statement" launched today, Health Day at COP 16 (1), calls on negotiators to consider the "real costs" of climate change and the benefits of strong action by taking the human health dimension into account.

Endorsed by the World Medical Association (2), the International Council of Nurses and other global health organisations representing millions of health professionals worldwide (3), the Cancun Climate and Health Statement calls on the negotiators to "take into account the significant human health dimensions of the climate crisis along with the health benefits of climate change mitigation and adaptation policies."

Dr Michael Wilks from the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) (4) in announcing the Statement during a meeting of the World Health Organization (5) says:

"Overwhelming evidence exists that reducing greenhouse gases benefits not just health but countries' economies. These "co-benefits" provide all those attending Cancun with a powerful and unifying new narrative - reducing greenhouse gases is good for your health, and for your budget."

One regional example of these co-benefits is recent research published by the Health and Environment Alliance and Health Care Without Harm Europe. It shows that up to an additional 30.5 billion Euros of public health benefits could be achieved each year by 2020 if the European Union adopted a policy of 30% domestic cuts in greenhouse gas emissions (instead of the current 20% target). (6)

But negotiators in Cancun are barely mentioning this health dividend to the climate talks. "Negotiations seem focussed on financial rather than human costs of climate change," says Professor Hugh Montgomery, University College London. "We want them to take into account the fact that, quite aside from any benefits from averting climate change, strong data show that low-carbon living brings with it enormous benefits to health (less cancer, heart and respiratory disease, dementia, diabetes, depressive illness) and with that comes huge savings in healthcare costs. These health gains could substantially offset the costs of mitigation and urgently need to be factored in." (7)

"Monetary estimates of public health savings do not just apply to Europe: a recent independent scientific report shows that such health and financial gains apply worldwide, and especially to countries such as India and China."(8) "We want the even greater benefits for health in countries and regions other than Europe to be taken into account by governments and acted upon. It is high time for governments to realise that reducing greenhouse gas emissions will improve human health and save them money. Today - Health Day at COP 16 - we plan to take this message to delegates," says Pendo Maro, Senior Climate Change and Energy Policy Advisor, Health Care Without Harm Europe (HCWH Europe) and Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL).

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Notes

1. Health Day at COP 16 has been organised to bring the health community together to highlight the benefits for public health of strong climate change to delegates. Doctors and health experts believe that this is a crucial argument for why we need to work towards a global agreement.
2. The World Medical Association is a credited observer at the UNFCCC talks. The December issue of its Journal will feature climate change. See www.wma.net
3. The Cancun Climate and Health Statement is signed by ten organisations: Climate and Health Council, International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, Health and Environment Alliance, Health Care Without Harm, International Council of Nurses, International Society of Doctors for the Environment, Physicians for Social Responsibility, Standing Committee of European Doctors, World Federation of Public Health Associations, and World Medical Association. It has also been endorsed by Richard Horton, Editor, The Lancet, and Fiona Godlee, Editor, British Medical Journal. It is available at www.env-health.org and <http://www.noharm.org/europe/pressroom/> in English, French and Spanish.
4. Dr Michael Wilks, Climate Advisor and Immediate Past President of the Standing Committee of European Doctors (CPME) is part of the Health and Environment Alliance/Health Care Without Harm Europe delegation in Cancun. CPME represents 27 medical associations with approximately 1.5 million members in Europe. Other members are Pendo Maro (see above), Prof Hugh Montgomery, University College London, UK and Walter Vernon (HCWH US Board), San Francisco, USA. More about them at www.env-health.org/healthclimate and at <http://www.noharm.org/europe/issues/climate/>. The delegation is working closely with other groups in Cancun including International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) and Nurses Across the Borders (Nigeria).
5. The Cancun Climate and Health Statement will be announced by Dr Wilks at a World Health Organization and World Food Programme "side event" called **"Improving resilience to protect human health and welfare from the adverse affects of climate change"** to be held on Monday, 6 December from **13.20 to 14.40** (Mexico time, minus 6 GMT).
6. "Acting Now for better health, A 30% reduction target for EU climate policy", HEAL and HCWH Europe, Brussels, September 2010
7. Prof Montgomery was one of the lead authors involved in The Lancet Series, Health and Climate Change, November 2009. One study showed that lower carbon policies in London and New Delhi associated more "active transport" (walking and cycling), more public transport and reduced use of private cars could produce measurable benefits for heart disease, cerebro-vascular disease, dementia, breast cancer, lung cancer, colon cancer, diabetes, and depression. It was called "Public health benefits of strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions: urban land transport."
8. Inter Academy Medical Panel, 2010, Statement on the health co-benefits of policies to tackle Climate Change (from Haines A, et al. (2009). Public health benefits of strategies to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions: overview and implications for policy makers. The Lancet. doi:10.1016/S0140-6736(09)61759-1.)

Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) aims to raise awareness of how environmental protection and sustainability improves health and to empower the health community to contribute their expertise to policy making. Since its inception, HEAL's membership has grown to include a diverse network of more than 60 citizens', patients', women's, health professionals' and environmental organizations across Europe which together have a strong track record in increasing public and expert engagement in both EU debates and the decision-making process. Website: www.env-health.org

Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) is a global network of more than 484 organisations in 53 countries working to transform the health care sector so it is no longer a source of harm to people and the environment. www.noharm.org