

Prescription for a Healthy Planet

The problem

There is increasingly powerful scientific evidence that climate change is not only a reality now but is threatening to become a far more destructive phenomenon much more quickly than even recently predicted.

One of the most disturbing implications of climate change is its potentially dramatic impact on human health around the world. As the Lancet Commission report says: “the effects of climate change on health will affect most populations in the next decades and put the lives and well-being of billions of people at increased risk.”

Overall, the health impacts of climate change will be disproportionately felt by the most vulnerable populations - the poor, the very young, the elderly and the medically infirm.

The World Health Organization predicts that climate change will lead to a series of significant health impacts, including: higher levels of some air pollutants and concomitant increased respiratory disease; the spread of diseases such as cholera, malaria, dengue and other infectious diseases; the compromising of agricultural production and food security in some of the least developed countries leading to greater malnutrition; an increase in extreme weather events like floods and droughts with dramatic impacts especially on the health of people living in coastal communities.

The health sector on the front lines

Healthcare providers and public health practitioners will be on the front lines, confronting and adapting to this changing landscape and shifting burden of disease. Such adaptation will come at a cost: the more severe the health-related symptoms of climate change, the greater the outlay of financial and human resources that will be required to treat them.

The health sector itself also makes a significant contribution to the problem of climate change. Healthcare is a major consumer of energy, water, computers, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, food and other resources. This consumption leaves a significant climate footprint.

A leadership role

Precisely because the healthcare sector's climate impact is so far-reaching, it must play a leadership role in developing and modelling solutions for the rest of society.

Many healthcare institutions are already employing a diversity of cost-effective climate-mitigation measures including energy efficiency, on-site alternative energy generation, green building design and construction, along with more climate-friendly procurement, transportation, food, waste and water-use policies.

Done correctly, these efforts to reduce our climate footprint and to move healthcare toward carbon neutrality will also create major benefits for public health. The extent of these benefits is only gradually becoming known.

Reducing our reliance on fossil fuels and moving toward clean, renewable energy can have the added benefit of reducing local pollution generated by the combustion of coal, oil and gas. This in turn would reduce the number of respiratory illnesses related to such energy consumption, thereby improving public health. Visionary action to mitigate climate change now will go a long way toward avoiding major health challenges in the future.

The Prescription for a Healthy Planet, if implemented, would both help mitigate climate change's most severe impacts while ensuring major benefits to society by protecting public health.

Reducing the health sector's climate footprint

As health professionals and representatives of major healthcare and public health institutions and associations, we pledge to aggressively address climate change in our sector and to promote health-friendly climate policy in all sectors.

We will work together as part of a global network to conduct research, share information and strategies to reduce our climate footprint, adapt our health systems and promote policies for mitigating climate change that also achieve significant benefits for public health.

Ultimately it is up to the leaders of the world to establish a forward thinking framework that transcends immediate political prerogatives to adequately confront this looming threat.

Therefore we are calling on all world leaders to take a strong and visionary stand in the Copenhagen negotiations in December, as well as in the national and international policy debates that ensue, by following this simple and clear Prescription for a Healthy Planet.

The clock is ticking. The time for action is now.

A prescription for a healthy planet

- **Protect Public Health:** Take into account the significant human health dimensions of the climate crisis along with the health benefits of climate change mitigation policies. In conjunction with this, a portion of climate mitigation and adaptation funds should be targeted for the health sector. This is needed to ensure evidence of the health impacts of climate change is continuously updated and brought to policy makers, so that the health sector can adapt to the health impacts of climate change while reducing its own climate footprint. To assure a strong voice in the debate, the health sector should also be adequately represented on all national delegations to Copenhagen.
- **Transition to Clean Energy:** A viable accord must promote solutions to the climate crisis that move away from coal, oil, gas, nuclear power, waste incineration and fossil-fuel-intensive agriculture. The Copenhagen treaty should foster energy efficiency as well as clean, renewable energy that improves public health by reducing both local and global pollution.
- **Reduce Emissions:** In order to protect human and environmental health, the world's governments must take urgent action to drastically reduce world-wide emissions by 2050. Over the next decade, developed countries must significantly reduce their greenhouse gas emissions below 1990 levels. Developing countries must also commit to stabilizing and reducing their emissions.
- **Finance Global Action:** A fair and equitable agreement in Copenhagen should also provide new and additional resources for developing countries to reduce their climate footprint and adapt to the impacts of climate change.



The *Prescription for a Healthy Planet* is an initiative of Health Care Without Harm and the Health and Environment Alliance



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