Health professionals must lead on fighting climate change

Climate change resulting from carbon dioxide and short lived climate pollutant emissions poses serious threats to human health

Health professionals must act together to urge drastic reductions in carbon dioxide and short lived climate pollutants - the main contributors to climate change - argue leading experts in The BMJ this week.

These drastic reductions are needed to stabilise the climate below 2°C warming and reduce major threats to health, including from extreme events such as heat waves, droughts, floods, and fires and to food production for many millions of people, they argue.

The World Health Organization says that without adequate mitigation and adaptation "climate change poses unacceptable risks to global public health.”

"It’s imperative that health professionals worldwide show strong leadership in tackling climate change,” argue Distinguished Professor Veerabhadran Ramanathan from the Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego, and Professor Sir Andy Haines from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.
They explain that carbon dioxide and the four short lived climate pollutants (SLCPs)—methane, black carbon, ozone, and hydrofluorocarbons—are the main contributors to climate change.

However, the four SLCPs are “super pollutants” as they contribute as much as 40% to climate change, and are up to 2,000 times more powerful per molecule than CO2 in warming the climate.

SLCPs, especially black carbon particles, are also super pollutants in terms of public health effects.

Fine particulate air pollution from solid biomass fuels, which emit a large amount of black carbon particles, and burning fossil fuels contribute to around 7 million deaths per year, mostly from heart disease, stroke, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease from both household and outdoor exposure.

They explain that if past trends in emission growth continue beyond 2050, “our grandchildren will witness around 4°C warming, with potentially devastating consequences.”

Drastic reductions in carbon dioxide and SLCPs are needed to “bend the emission curve downwards" and "stabilise climate change within one generation", and “make the global economy carbon neutral this century,” they say.

Reducing SLCPs will cut pollution and reduce the rate of warming by as much as 50% by 2050, and would prevent around 2.4 million premature deaths annually from reduced air pollution, they explain.

"Health professionals have key roles in fighting climate change caused by both short lived climate pollutants and carbon dioxide," they argue.
They need to show how destruction of ecosystems, declines in crop yields, and ocean acidification could reverse recent advances in global health, especially on populations of low income countries.

Furthermore, health professionals should emphasise the health benefits of a decarbonised economy, and engage fully with industry leaders to achieve this goal.

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Note to Editors:
Editorial: Healthcare professionals must lead on climate change
http://www.bmj.com/content/355/bmj.i5245

The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change will be launching a report "A Breath of Fresh Air", on health, climate change, and air pollution on 18 October. For more information, visit: http://www.ukhealthalliance.org

The BMJ is a found member of The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change. For more information, visit: http://www.bmj.com/campaign/climate-change

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