

BULLETIN

How climate change affects public health, and what we can do about it

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By Tim Lim

Universal health care is an issue of national pride, shared among Canadians. Similarly, Canadians take pride in the beautiful nature encompassed in the country.



Yet with recent climate change pressures – from hurricanes and floods to ravaging forest fires – the effects of climate change are threatening our ecosystems and becoming more intertwined with our daily health.

In the last decade, the impacts of climate change have become a reality for Canadians, and have not come without a cost. In 2013, flooding in Alberta caused the evacuation of health centres, climate change is harming Canadians in a variety of ways, including: eco-anxiety, trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder from wild fire and flood displacements, exacerbated asthma and hay fever from prolonged pollen seasons, cardiorespiratory issues from air pollution and wildfires, and increasing cases of heat stroke or death, according to a 2018 report produced by the Canadian Medical Association and the Canadian Public Health Association.

100,000 Albertans, while damage losses and recovery costs exceeded \$6 billion dollars. In 2016, the Fort McMurray and Wood Buffalo region wildfires had an estimated \$8.9 billion financial and economic impact, which included health impacts.

Within a month of evacuation, 8,700 people contacted Alberta Health Services for psychosocial support. And between May 10 and June 30, 2016, 20,000 referrals to local mental health and addictions staff were made, compared to the pre-wildfire rate of 1,200 referrals per year. Meanwhile, one in five firefighters reported respiratory problems after the wildfire, according to a post-incident assessment report commissioned by the Alberta Emergency Management Agency.

In 2018, while Quebec's extreme heat killed at least 90 people, British Columbia's nearly 600 wildfires led to a

provincial declaration state of emergency and left many British Columbians and Albertans blanketed in smoke. Unfortunately, ongoing climate change affects our most vulnerable people, particularly children and the elderly.

Climate change continues to disproportionately threaten Indigenous communities' health and way of life. Indigenous peoples have a long history of adapting and coping with environmental changes, however due to anthropogenic climate change, historical adaptation efforts have become less effective and threaten food security.

For instance, the Canadian Arctic is experiencing one of the most rapid temperature warmings on Earth, negatively affecting ice coverage, water systems, flora, and fauna, which all have implications to Inuit physical, mental and cultural well being. Indigenous health and climate change expert Sherilee L. Harper documents this in her 2015 study, which explores climatic change in Nunatsiavut, Labrador and perceived impacts on health.

In a time of ongoing challenges, there is, however, much hope - we have the solutions to fight climate change through actions. Recognizing that the climate crisis is no longer a niche issue and seeing it through the perspectives of various disciplines - including the health sciences - will help us solve this emergent crisis.

Remember to practice the three Rs in order - first reducing your waste, then reusing, and subsequently recycling if the prior are not achievable. Carpooling, taking public transit or biking to work, and eating more plant-based proteins and foods can promote health and wellbeing, all the while reducing one's environmental impact.

According to the International Panel on Climate Change, we have 11 years to act. With the upcoming federal election, all parties should recognize climate change, in the words of former World Health Organization Director-General Dr. Margaret Chan, as "the greatest health threat of the 21st century." They should seek radical climate solutions that will in turn protect public health, reduce healthcare costs and improve equity amongst Canadians.

To seek policy change, HSA members can check to ensure that the party they plan to vote for addresses climate change and its effects on public health as a priority issue in the upcoming federal election. Additionally, signing petitions such as the Blue Dot Movement petition, which seeks to recognize the legal right to live in a healthy environment, or becoming involved in local grassroots movements are all means of promoting a sustainable future.

For the union itself, HSA has a platform to lobby the government for policies that reflect the security of our health and environment. Regardless the size of action, we can all do our part to help change the trajectory of our future.

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