

Time to Get on With It: Climate Change Needs Public Health Action Now

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This journal has published numerous articles on climate change and its implications for public health. As we are preparing this issue for publication and writing the editorial, the United Nations has been debating climate change in New York. The world has been transfixed by the image of a 15-year-old Swedish schoolgirl, Greta Thunberg, who sailed across the dangerous North Atlantic in a yacht, to speak at the United Nations. She was applauded by millions, who joined the rallies of the students and adults, your editors included, to advocate for worldwide action against climate change. Her words were powerful and scientifically accurate:

People are dying; entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are in the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairy tales of eternal economic growth. How dare you!

This is a powerful public health message that requires urgent action. It was disappointing that the United Nations calls for action were ignored or even ridiculed by some governments. The words of the presidents of the small island communities are more in line with the science as they urge the larger economies to save their countries.¹ Actions to mitigate climate change have so far been totally useless. In 2018, carbon dioxide emissions reached their highest level ever, 37 billion tons, and despite the claims of individual government, are still rising at a rate of 2% per annum. The 2015 to 2019 period will be the hottest 4 years ever experienced.² The report concludes that climate impacts are hitting faster and harder than were predicted a decade ago.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been providing scientific reports on the impact of climate change and during the United Nations Assembly released its latest report on Oceans and the Cryosphere.³ This report also documented that climate change is happening at a rate toward the higher end of predicted values and stated that 680 million people living in low-lying coastal zones are at risk from changing ocean systems. Rising seas and increasing violent weather events are putting at risk the low-lying rice paddies of Asia. Warming and acidifying tropical seas are decreasing fish yields, with an effect on food supplies and nutrition. Small island developing states are home to 65 million people and some are at risk of disappearing. Many of these vulnerable communities are in the Asia-Pacific region. We congratulate the Medical School of the National Maldives University, which is supported academically by the National University of Malaysia, who celebrated their first anniversary with a conference with one of your editors as

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a speaker. Unfortunately, the whole country of the Maldives may disappear this century. The Maldives has recently constructed a new island, Hulhumalé, which has been built 60 cm higher than the normal island elevation of 1.5 m. But this will only partially resist the impact of rising oceans.

The public health implications of climate change have been well documented in many reviews, including in our journal and are becoming very obvious. Rising sea levels and increasing catastrophic events will threaten food supplies in our region.^{4,5} Increasing ambient temperatures have already increased the spread of some vector-borne diseases, such as dengue and this is likely to get worse.⁶⁻⁹ Climate change has already contributed to the major war in Syria with deaths and million displaced persons.¹⁰ There are many more public implication of climate change as detailed in the World Health Organization report.

Scientists have been discussing the implications of greenhouse gases and climate change for more than 50 years. The short-term nature of political cycles and the reluctance of richer economies to work toward a more equal world have hampered progress. For political reasons, Australia removed its carbon tax, a measure acknowledged internationally as one of the best ways to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Several years ago, the *Lancet's* Commission on Climate Change and Health recommended governments “invest in climate change and public health research”; “finance climate-resilient health systems”; and “collaborate to implement policies that mitigate climate change and promote public health, and monitor progress over the next 15 years.”¹¹ Schools of public health and the public health community need to continue to advocate for these objectives and further actions to control climate change. We have previously written about making climate change a public health priority, and we need to continue to educate our students to meet the threats to health that we are already experiencing.¹²

Climate change will increase inequity as the wealthiest have the flexibility to make adjustments. In this issue, Wu et al describe the wide racial differences in healthy life expectancies between the racial groups in Hawaii.¹³ Similar discrepancies still exist in Europe where a recent World Health Organization review highlighted differences despite the abundance of research available there.¹⁴ Equity and climate change are both important areas of public health and we welcome further discussion of this topic within our pages.

At the time of finalizing this editorial, China is celebrating the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Early last century life expectancy was as short as 25 years and infant mortality around 300 per 1000 live births.^{15,16} Since 1949, public health has improved at a rapid rate and infant mortality is now 8 and life expectancy has reached 77 years, an impressive rate of progress. This journal offers our congratulations to our public health colleagues in China for this remarkable improvement in the health of their people.

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