

Editorial

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Climate change and chronic disease: public health writ large

*The Stern report of 2006 highlighted the potentially great damage to the world's economic system from unconstrained climate change. The greater risk, however, is to the vitality and health of all species, including humans, if current trends continue to weaken the earth's life support systems. The health professions have a crucial role in promoting public understanding of this fundamental association and health-protecting responses to it.*¹

Public health medicine has always been holistic. It lost some of its influence on policy while 20th century medicine went looking for biotechnical magic bullets, but it will be public health, not the pharma-industry, that drives solutions to our most pressing health problems – climate change and chronic disease. The 2008 Royal College of Physicians' conference on climate change and the British Medical Journal's recent articles on the health benefits of climate change policy² signal growing mainstream interest in this connection, and the resurgence of public health medicine.

Stern's review of climate-change economics finally laid to rest the notion of global warming as some post-hippy fantasy. Oddly, the review made little of the climate change/health connection, despite global warming having given 21st century public health such eco-economic leverage. For tackling climate change will produce immense health gains, and post-Stern, planetary and personal wellbeing will be forever intertwined, and seen as entangled with mass production and consumption.

These are not abstractions; when it comes to health, the global and the local are directly connected. The agribusiness worldwide – especially livestock production – accounts for about a fifth of greenhouse gas emissions, so reducing our consumption of saturated fat and meat would make the climate more stable while helping prevent cardiovascular disease and bowel cancer.³ Air pollution, most of it transport-related, kills nearly a million people a year, while road accidents cause over a million deaths annually and ten million serious injuries worldwide.⁴ QED – more low carbon transport would simultaneously slash accident rates and carbon footprints, and help curb the obesity pandemics.⁵

Such holistic solutions snowball when biological gains and social advantages reinforce one another. These tie-ups should be no surprise, since global warming and many chronic diseases result from over-consumption and stagnation; traditional healers would find parallels between personal and global accumulation of wastes and toxins. It

seems that what's good for chronic disease – eating low in the food chain, more exercise – may be good for the planet too.

Is a reversal possible? In the early 1990s, Cuba (a third world economy with a first world academic and medical system) was forced into low carbon policies by Soviet collapse and the American economic blockade. Today it is the only country that has met UN development goals and kept its carbon footprint below international targets.⁶ The blockade that cut Cuba off from global pharma- and agri-industries incidentally promoted indigenous medicine and organic farming; another example of the holistic snowball effect.

Can the NHS (annual budget in England more than £80bn), formerly a by-word for waste, snowball away its enormous carbon footprint? The NHS Sustainable Development Unit will promote a more energy-efficient NHS⁷ and many Trusts are already considering carbon-neutral building design, eco-friendly supply chains and energy-efficient transport policies. Staff-led initiatives are spreading too: turning off lights and computers and fitting low-energy bulbs saved one small hospital £14,000 in a year. The same simple scheme could save millions nationally: money better spent on healthcare than on heating up the atmosphere.⁸

Holistic healthcare involves helping people lead healthier lives and developing sustainable healthcare options. We can make people aware of the health risks of climate change, and the health advantages of tackling it. If the earth is to sustain us, inaction is not a choice.

References

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The Climate and Health Council is a not-for-profit international organisation aiming to mobilise health professionals across the world to take action against the most serious threat to human health – climate change. The BHMA is a member. www.climateandhealth.org/