

DID YOU KNOW? ... BY TAKING ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE YOU CAN STRENGTHEN PUBLIC HEALTH

WHO message to health professionals: *Climate change will be the defining issue for health systems in the 21st century, interacting with all of the social determinants of health. Health professionals have the knowledge and responsibility to protect health from climate change.*

Why should health professionals care about the impact of climate change?

- 1. The health of patients is directly threatened by climate change.** There is a strong scientific consensus that climate change will have profoundly adverse effects on some of the most fundamental determinants of health: food, air and water. Climate change will cause more severe storms, heatwaves, floods, droughts and fires, with consequent disruptions in water and food supplies and medical and other services, loss of homes and livelihoods, injuries, illnesses and deaths. Higher temperatures will change the distribution, and increase the burden, of various vector-borne, food-borne and waterborne infectious diseases.
- 2. The health profession can tackle non-communicable diseases and climate change at the same time.** The rapid increase in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as cardiovascular disease, diabetes, and chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder presents a unique challenge to health professionals world-wide. In countries where cars are the predominant means of transport, shifting to more walking and cycling will lower carbon emissions, increase physical activity, reduce traffic-related injuries and deaths and result in less pollution. In countries where solid fuels are the predominant form of household heating and cooking energy, changing to cleaner fuels and getting more efficient stoves will lead to fewer illnesses and deaths related to indoor air pollution. Experience shows that money saved from not having to cover the health-care costs of environmental health risks and lost work time often matches or exceeds the costs of tackling the hazard itself!
- 3. The health sector itself is an important contributor to greenhouse gas emissions.** In many high-income countries, the formal health sector is responsible for a substantial proportion of carbon emissions. For example, in 2012, the UK's National Health Service emitted an alarming 40% of England's public sector emissions. In response to this, many hospitals and health facilities are demonstrating that strategies to improve patient quality of care often go hand-in-hand with carbon reduction strategies. These benefits often yield cost-savings, and are realised in part by altering patient clinical pathways, ensuring local and sustainable procurement, and retrofitting health facilities with energy-efficient design and technology. In settings where reliable electricity isn't available for health facilities, investing in renewable technologies such as solar power generation is now an affordable alternative to diesel-powered generators.
- 4. Health professionals have a responsibility to protect their patients' health from climate change.** Health professionals working at the local, national and international level have the responsibility, political leverage and necessary skills to protect the public from climate-related threats to health. Failure to respond will be very costly in terms of disease, health-care expenditure and lost productivity. There are important equity considerations as well. In all countries, people at greatest risk include those who are very young, elderly, and medically infirm. Low-income countries will have most difficulty adapting to climate change and related health hazards. The populations

considered to be at greatest risk are those living in small island developing states, mountainous regions, water-stressed areas, megacities and coastal areas in developing countries (particularly the large urban agglomerations in delta regions in Asia), and also poor people and those unprotected by health services.

What can health professionals do about it?

- 1. Learn, assess and plan.** Health professionals can learn about the specific climate-related threats to the populations and patients with whom they work (see <http://www.who.int/phe>). They can assess their own and their health system's capacities to cope and they can work with others to plan adaptation and mitigation strategies. Better evidence is needed for the effectiveness and efficiency of public health and health service measures to protect health from climate change. Health professionals can respond to this need by engaging in systematic, interdisciplinary applied research.
- 2. Strengthen adaptive capacity.** Whilst there will be limits to adaptation, many of the projected impacts on health are avoidable or controllable through application of well-known and well-tested public health and health service interventions. These include public education, surveillance of diseases, disaster preparedness, mosquito control, food hygiene and inspection, nutritional supplementation, vaccines, primary and mental health care, and training. Where these capacities are weak, health professionals can work with others to strengthen them.
- 3. Act as stewards of health-related mitigation.** By engaging in local public health and environmental policymaking, health professionals can ensure that interventions to mitigate climate change are designed in a way that maximises human wellbeing. It is essential to assess the health implications of decisions taken in other sectors, such as urban planning, transport, energy supply, food production, land use and water resources. In this way, health professionals can support decisions that provide opportunities for improving health, the environment and the economy (see above), such as investment in sustainable transport and cleaner domestic energy.
- 4. Lead by example.** Health professionals and the health sector can enhance their own moral authority to lead by reducing the carbon emissions of their own hospital or clinic, improving patient care and saving money. Six action areas include: managing energy, transport, procurement (including food), buildings and landscape, employment and skills, and community engagement. Good practice in these areas has been shown to improve staff health and morale, create healthier local populations, stimulate faster patient recovery rates and save money.
- 5. Advocate for health to be at the centre of all climate change policies and plans.** Health professionals can use their knowledge and authority to inform and influence action in key national and international processes that guide policy and resources for work on climate change, such as preparation of national communications, national adaptation programmes of action and international agreements.

For more information visit www.who.int/globalchange