

# Global physician groups call on profession to address environmental health threats

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**R**espiratory illness from wildfires. Deaths from heat waves. Medical supplies delayed by storms. Spreading infectious diseases. Rapid environmental changes are making people sicker and cutting lives short, according to the World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA).

The group, which represents half a million doctors in 131 countries, is calling on all physicians to prepare for and prevent escalating harms from climate change. The declaration is cosigned by the Planetary Health Alliance, an international consortium of 130 nonprofit, research and government organizations.

Millions of Canadians were affected by wildfires, power outages, tornadoes, floods and heat waves last year. Worldwide, air pollution alone is responsible for more than seven million deaths. “This is not the new normal. It’s going to get worse,” says Dr. Courtney Howard, North American cochair of WONCA’s working group on the environment.

The world is on track to warm to levels that would be catastrophic for human health by the end of the century. Scientists have called for unprecedented global action to reduce emissions by 45% in the next 12 years to limit warming to a level that’s livable.

health,” says Howard. However, that’s changing as physicians see more patients affected. “All of these heat events, the wildfires, it’s landing in people’s bodies in a way that is new.”

WONCA recommends doctors prepare their practices for disasters and advocate for their patients, organizations and countries to reduce their environmental footprints. This includes promoting plant-based diets, active transit and renewable energy.

It also means tackling waste in the health care system, says Howard. The American health system alone emits more greenhouse gas than the entire United Kingdom. Even small changes could result in immense energy savings, says Howard. For example, “hospitals are spending way more than they need to on energy because they’re turning over the air in operating rooms on evenings, nights and weekends at the same rate they’re required to do while operating.”

Substantial reductions are achievable with the right motivation, Howard noted. The United Kingdom cut carbon emissions by 41% between 1990 and 2016, with the National Health Service meeting its 10% reduction target in 2015 despite an 18% increase in activity.

Five Canadian health organizations, including the Canadian Medical Association and Canadian Nurses Association, recently urged all federal political parties to develop plans to achieve similar reductions.

Physicians are one of the groups with the most potential to influence change in a short time, Howard says. “It’s really our responsibility as a profession to offer a concrete treatment plan going forward.”

**Lauren Vogel, CMAJ**



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The World Organization of Family Doctors is urging physicians to step up action on planetary health.

“The risks are not theoretical. They are not scare-mongering. Family doctors owe it to themselves and their patients and future generations to reduce the growing risks we face from environmental threats,” said Sir Andrew Haines, chair of the Lancet Commission on Planetary Health.

The declaration outlines ways that physicians can help, starting with learning about the environmental threats facing their communities. “We’ve had a problem with physicians not knowing what they don’t know about climate change and ecological change and their impact on