

Should physicians rethink travel to conferences?

2021 was a year like no other as the planet experienced an unrelenting series of climate-related disasters. The widespread nature and severity of these disasters, from a deep freeze in Texas that left 4.5 million people without power, to the heat dome that suffocated western Canada and killed 595 people in British Columbia, to the wildfires in Turkey that destroyed 1700 km² of forest, to the atmospheric river that devastated the BC Interior and forced almost 20 000 people to flee their homes, were unignorable reminders of the future disasters we will face if we do not do all that we can to mitigate climate change. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has indicated that the planet is in a “code red” situation and change must occur now if we are to prevent unthinkable devastation.¹

As physicians, we bear a special responsibility to be leaders and role models in taking action against climate change and changing our lifestyles in ways that embody this responsibility. One such action can be reducing unnecessary air travel. Flight is often cited as a disproportionate cause of climate change because of the additive effects of fossil fuel consumption with the subsequent greenhouse gas emissions and the water vapour in contrails that help to trap heat near the earth’s surface.² Although the

airline industry is making great efforts to reduce the deleterious effects of air travel on the environment, they are several years away from widely implementing these changes, and with the industry looking to increase its customer base, its actual contribution to climate change may increase rather than decrease.

Professional conferences are a mainstay of professional development for physicians. They also provide valuable opportunities to network with colleagues. Unfortunately, these conferences also require large numbers of physicians to fly to other parts of the country. In 2020 and 2021, many conferences adapted to provide their content in an online format. Although the experience was undoubtedly different than an in-person conference, it provided physicians the opportunity to participate in these conferences without stepping on a plane. As the world transitions back to a state of “normal” and in-person conferences resume, I urge all conference-organizing committees to continue to provide an option for people to attend conferences virtually. The reasons a physician may choose to attend virtually rather than in person are manifold, from clinical obligations, to a need to care for family members, to a desire to reduce their carbon footprint. Without a virtual option, these physicians are left to choose between these factors and not attending at all.

Although choosing not to fly to a conference to reduce one’s carbon footprint

makes a small difference to carbon emissions on a global scale, the planet is at a point where every action taken matters, and, as physicians, we bear too great a responsibility to not do all that we can.³

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