

Code Green: Health Professionals' Climate Call to Action

Deanna Benner, MSN, APRN, WHNP-BC

The fundamental tenet of health care is to “do no harm.” However, the current practice of health care delivery in the United States is producing direct harm to our environment, and indirect harm to health of our community members (Eckelman et al., 2016). The health care industry in the United States has a large ecological footprint contributing 8.5% of our total carbon emissions gases (Eckelman et al., 2020). These gases directly contribute to climate change which then affects health, exacerbates health disparities, and causes premature deaths. It is now estimated that deaths related to health care pollution are comparable to the magnitude of deaths due to medical errors (Eckelman et al., 2020).

The World Health Organization (2023) has declared that climate change is the biggest health threat facing humanity, and we are already seeing the health harms caused by this global warming. The good news is that there is still time to mitigate the effects of climate change and to improve the health of our community going forward. Climate scientists have found a range of possible future changes in earth's temperature, but it will depend largely on how quickly we reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The 5th Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014) released this scientific data, paving the way for the Paris Agreement. This international treaty set the goal of limiting global warming to 1.5°C—the known threshold for preventing further catastrophic weather events.

Unfortunately, many countries that pledged reductions in emissions under the Paris Agreement have not taken the necessary steps to achieve those goals. Politics, power relationships, and climate disinformation campaigns are responsible for blocking the necessary climate policies. In addition, scientists underestimated the effects of warming on our ecosystem, so we are seeing faster

and more significant environmental consequences than ever predicted. As a result, it is **Now or Never** to limit global warming. We are at a crossroads, and we all need to take actions now to make a secure, livable future for all people (IPCC, 2022).

There is a lot of conflicting information in the media regarding climate change, leading to confusion as to who people can turn to for facts. Health professionals need to be the ones communicating to the public climate information because according to Gallup polling, we are the most trusted voices in America. For the past 20 years in a row, nurses have been voted the #1 most trusted profession, while physicians are close behind in second place. Health professionals are the trusted voices that have the unique opportunity to communicate to the public the importance of supporting global efforts to decrease greenhouse emissions to protect the health of all people and the health of the planet (Kotcher et al., 2021).

To be trusted voices, health professionals must seek the knowledge to fully understand the relationship between climate and health. We must then put that environmental wisdom into action by modeling and speaking up for sustainability at work and in our communities so everyone can understand how our health is connected to the way we interact with our environment. May we always be mindful of the way we deliver care and never lose sight of the connection between health care pollution and the increased burden of disease on public health. We have the responsibility to use our trusted voices to advocate to leadership in our departments, hospitals, communities, and governments for policies that protect public health from climate change.

It is crucial that we work together and engage in this vital issue, as time is running out to limit global warming and ensure a

stable, livable planet for all. Each of us has the power and responsibility to direct action towards more environmentally responsible healthcare. We can rise to the challenge and become stewards of a healthier planet for today and future generations. The changes we lead can spark transformation far beyond healthcare. By placing health at the center of climate action, we can spearhead carbon emission reduction efforts. Our leadership can inspire other sectors, potentially catalyzing widespread adoption of sustainable practices and significantly contributing to global carbon reduction goals. ■

References online:

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seeker account and
keep your career on
the move

