

Environmental threats to health

Environmental Committee of the Ontario College of Family Physicians

Worsening air pollution and climate change were catalysts for an innovative public health initiative by the Ontario College of Family Physicians (OCFP) and the David Suzuki Foundation.

Physicians have always led the way in public health campaigns, from the 19th-century sanitary revolution to tobacco-control programs that continue today. Studies show that, for the public, doctors are the most trusted source of environmental health information. As members of the OCFP Environmental Committee, we feel a professional responsibility to educate the public about the deteriorating air quality that is creating an extremely unhealthy atmosphere for Canadians.

In this spirit, the OCFP joined forces with the David Suzuki Foundation, a science-based environmental organization founded by Dr David Suzuki, to warn Canadians about the dangers to health of emissions from burning fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and gas.

This large-scale initiative began by sending a poster and leaflets to every member of the OCFP. The eye-catching poster drew attention to the worsening problem of polluting emissions that fill our air—a fact of life to which Canadians are becoming all too accustomed. The 200 leaflets that accompanied each poster are meant to be given to patients to educate them about air pollution and climate change and encourage them to learn about and seek solutions to the problems.

This project was conceived in October 1998, when the OCFP joined the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons, the Canadian Lung Association, and other prominent health organizations to endorse a ground-breaking report on the health effects of air pollution and climate change commissioned by the David Suzuki Foundation. Titled *Taking Our Breath Away*,¹ the report was written by epidemiologists Dr John Last and Dr Konia Trouton and air-pollution expert Dr David Pengally.

Fossil fuels

Fossil fuel air pollution means that up to 6000 people in Ontario die prematurely each year and increasing numbers of people attend emergency rooms for asthma and respiratory disease.²

Burning coal, oil, and gas produces the greenhouse gases that alter our climate. Last summer's sustained heat waves, with their accompanying heat-related illness and worsening smog, were a harbinger of the health effects we can expect in a warming global climate. Canadians are poorly adapted to deal with extremely hot weather, and if they do not acclimatize to higher temperatures, the current annual



number of heat-related deaths in Toronto could rise from 20 to as high as 290 by 2020 and 1240 by the year 2050.³

Climate change

Climate change is also expanding the range of disease-carrying organisms,⁴ which has already translated into increased rates of infectious diseases in some areas of North America.

Expanding pest populations could impair food production and, therefore, nutrition, while more extreme weather endangers lives and communities. Climate change is also expected to slow the recovery of the ozone layer.

If air pollution continues to worsen, it will mean more permanent damage to children's lungs because their developing respiratory systems are especially vulnerable to particulates and highly reactive ozone, both powerful cellular irritants. Climate change, already under way today, was deemed by the Canadian Public Health Association to be the greatest public health threat the world has ever faced. The greenhouse gas accumulations of today will erode our children's quality of life as they become adults, and will continue to ravage the air we breathe for many generations to come.

Family physicians play a critical role in protecting the health of individual patients and communities at large. Preventive health is key for these two separate but related environmental threats. We must begin by fulfilling our professional responsibility to provide accurate, up-to-date information on fossil fuel air pollution and climate change to patients, whose trust we serve.

To find out more

For more information or to receive a poster and leaflets, contact the Ontario College of Family Physicians, 357 Bay St, Suite 800, Toronto, ON M5H 2T7; telephone (416) 867-9646; fax (416) 867-9990; e-mail www.cfpc.ca/ocfp. You may also contact the David Suzuki Foundation, 2211 West 4th Ave, Suite 219, Vancouver, BC V6K 4S2; telephone (604) 732-4228; fax (604) 732-0752; e-mail www.davidsuzuki.org. ❖

References

1. Last J, Trouton K, Pengally D. *Taking our breath away*. Vancouver, BC: David Suzuki Foundation; 1998.
2. Government of Canada. *Canada's response to the US EPA proposal on transboundary air pollution*. Ottawa, Ont: Government of Canada; 1998.
3. McMichael AJ, Haines A, Sloof R, Korates S, editors. *Climate change and human health*. Geneva, Switz: World Health Organization; 1996.
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