

Climate Change and Health

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Healthcare Must Lead On Climate Change

GREEN BAY - Sustainability and climate change discussion needs a different perspective—human health. Healthcare's commitment to sustainability principles should not be focused on improving healthcare, but rather improving overall health. Medical care impacts only about 10% of outcomes that make us healthy. Life quality and expectancy improvements over the last several hundred years have been made in the basic fundamentals for health: clean air, clean water, enough nutritious food, safe shelter and community, regular physical activity, and stable civilization. Climate change threatens all of these fundamentals through increased air temperature, raised sea levels, and extreme weather, such as drought, flooding, and tropical storms.

Two areas to consider about climate change and health:

1. *Health impacts of climate change* – The National Climate Assessment released in May 2014 confirms that changes in climate threaten US human health and well-being in many ways and climate change will amplify some of the existing health threats the nation now faces in the future.

2. *Health impacts of fossil fuel usage, independent of climate change*: Fossil fuels contributes to four of the five leading causes of US deaths including heart disease, cancer, stroke and lung diseases, while putting our children at risk of asthma and delayed mental development. Particulate pollution, primarily from the burning of fossil fuels and biomass, is responsible for over 60,000 US deaths annually.

Already, impoverished areas see worse asthma, lung, and heart diseases. A warmer world will have more hospitalizations and deaths from asthma, COPD, and heart disease. Warmer air with

more CO₂ creates a longer pollen season with higher pollen concentrations, worsening asthma and other allergic diseases.

Healthcare executives have not looked widely/deeply enough to see the billions of dollars of potential savings by implementing best practices for climate change. One study projected a conservative estimate of \$15 Billion in energy savings for US healthcare alone. According to the National Academy of Sciences, the use of fossil fuels causes \$120B in health related damages/year. Replacing coal alone with efficient/clean energy could save 10,000 lives and \$60B annually.

In Wisconsin, the majority of agricultural land is dedicated to the dairy/meat industries, which negatively impact both our greenhouse gas emissions and watersheds. We import most of our fruit and vegetables which contributes needlessly to emissions. Healthcare and public/private educational institutions need to change how they purchase food and create a market for a vibrant year-round local food economy made up of urban and rural agriculture, delivered through an innovative food distribution system. Reducing our intake of meat—especially beef—will help people maintain a healthy weight, prevent heart disease and cancer, and is important in limiting climate change.

Improving the design of our cities/towns with pedestrians, bikes, and mass transit will reduce emissions and help people become more physically active, lose weight, and fight depression and obesity. Replacing short car trips in urban areas of the upper Midwest alone would save over 1200 lives and 8B/year from cleaner air and greater physical activity.

American healthcare organizations need to both support and encourage regional activism in sustainability and better health outcomes, but also climate change, energy alternatives, and healthy food. We can no longer do things the same way and expect different results. Healthcare can and needs to drive the change necessary to achieve sustainable healthy economic, environmental, and social outcomes.

In December, 2014, I joined a group of national healthcare leaders at the White House to announce our commitment to enhance the climate resilience of our facilities, operations, and communities we serve using the Administration's Climate Action Plan as a foundation. The plan recognizes that even as we take aggressive action to curb the carbon pollution that is driving climate change, we must also prepare for the climate impacts we are already seeing across the country. A Climate Change Resiliency Assessment is being tested at our facilities and will be

rolled out soon for all to collaborate.

The healthcare organizations that met at the White House are prominent in strategizing and implementing climate change and alternative energy policies, but, healthcare as a sector is not unified in these activities. This lack of unity is harming the local, regional, and global communities they are meant to serve. The work of Climate Change Council is to drive all healthcare organizations to engage their communities in climate change action. Otherwise, inaction will prove to be counterproductive and costly to both their brand and bottom line. Healthcare must take a leadership role in driving for alternative energy and climate change strategies.

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