

Climate Change and Health: A New Urgency



When the temperature reached 116°F in Oregon, I called my recently relocated colleague. “Are you keeping cool?” I asked? He described how the heat restricted his everyday activities, and filled the local hospitals with heat stroke victims,

“I hope that my own health holds up.”

The realities of climate change are with us—drought, raging fires, searing temperatures, vector-borne diseases, and flooding across the world just as the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹ is published. Some scientists assert that the world’s window is narrowing on its ability to create policy and change that will facilitate climate targets set in the Paris Agreement of 2015, particularly with respect to greenhouse gas emissions and renewable energy. Despite compelling evidence and direct experience with global warming and its effects on humanity’s health and well-being, change is protracted and deniers persist. What role might the nursing profession play in helping ensure the future of the planet?

In 2020, Kalogirou et al² studied nurses’ views of climate change and health and its relevance to nursing practice. Their findings indicated that nurses had varying levels of knowledge about the impact of climate change on health. Furthermore, climate change was viewed as a more personal concern rather than a professionally driven issue with a lack of clarity on nurses’ role in addressing the issue. They recommended additional work to bring climate change into the “consciousness of everyday nursing practice.”² How might this be done?

Nurses can commit to lifestyle changes that help mitigate carbon emissions such as eating less meat, walking, or cycling instead of driving, attending to waste disposal, especially plastics, and surveying our health care institutions for opportunities to reduce carbon emissions. We can collectively explore in our nursing organizations and staff development venues the connections between environmental issues and health problems. We can examine data on the number of patients we treat with health problems induced by the climate and environment. We can revise nursing curricula to prepare nurses for the health realities of climate change. We can heed the words of a climate scientist:

The earth is sick, and we suspect that it’s something bad. This heat, this melting, this flooding, these hurricanes, those blizzards—they are not normal, and we need to do the tests that allow for a firm diagnosis and a treatment plan. We hope that it is not as bad as it looks, but we need some support, cooperation, and a little patience to get to a definitive answer. (Hope Jahren,³ *The Story of More*)

—Gloria F. Donnelly, PhD, RN, FAAN, FCPP
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