



Our fight against climate change

Roger Ladouceur MD MSc CCMF(SP) FCMF, ASSOCIATE SCIENTIFIC EDITOR

The environment is a critical issue for our society. Every day, we hear about harmful effects that we are having on our planet: carbon dioxide emissions, greenhouse gases, rising temperatures, melting polar caps and permafrost, disappearing glaciers, rising sea levels, water contamination, seas swarming with plastic debris, destruction of ecosystems, clearing of forests, filling of marshlands, the ravages of pesticides, the decimation of bees, and the extinction of thousands of animal and plant species. In addition, there is news coverage about large-scale natural disasters: Spring flooding engulfing lowlands and inhabited areas. Local summer heat waves that suffocate our cities, resulting in the death of a number of vulnerable individuals. Fires that raze entire forests and destroy communities and cities. Hurricanes, tornadoes, and typhoons that wreak havoc on everything in their path.

Growing concern about environmental issues

Considering all this, it is difficult to believe that some people are still sceptical about climate change. These might simply be people who are in utter denial about climate change. Or they are climate apathetic, in the sense that they don't care. As long as it does not affect them, it does not exist. Or they are climate nihilistic instead, solely focused on economic development. They think "to hell with the environment" as long as the economy is going strong and money is abundant, even if it means that our world will be uninhabitable within the next 50 years. On this topic, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's special report on global warming of 1.5°C is a worthwhile read.¹

Fortunately, more and more individuals are concerned about environmental issues. In a number of countries, we are seeing the emergence of sociopolitical groups and organizations predominantly or exclusively devoted to protecting the environment. There is also concern in the general population. During the week of September 20 to 27, 2019, an estimated 6 to 7.6 million people worldwide took part in demonstrations in support of the environment. In Canada, as part of the Greta Thunberg movement, there were marches in about 85 cities. Approximately 2 million people took part in this movement, including about 350 000 to 500 000 in Montreal, Que.^{2,3}

What can we do?

Do family physicians have a specific role to play in all this? It might seem odd to be asking this type of question, knowing that in 2009, the *Lancet* announced climate change to be the biggest threat to the survival of humanity.⁴

I notice that many family physicians are concerned by these issues and act accordingly. For example, many bike to work (even in the winter), take public transportation, or replace their gas-guzzlers with electric cars. Recycling is part of daily life. Some colleagues are cutting back on their consumption of red meat or have become vegetarians or vegans. Others support the actions of organizations such as Greenpeace by distributing and signing their petitions. However, most of these initiatives reflect conscientious and engaged individual efforts and are not representative of family medicine.^{5,6}

So, what can family physicians do to save the planet? We could certainly join the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment⁷ and become role models in advocating for the environment, but admittedly, this is not at all specific to family medicine. An example of something we are doing at *Canadian Family Physician* is exploring non-plastic-based alternatives to the biodegradable polywrap the journal is mailed in.

I am appealing to everyone: What can we as the family medicine community at large do to be more involved in the fight against climate change and to preserve our planet? 🌿

References

1. Hoegh-Guldberg O, Jacob D, Taylor M, Bindi M, Brown S, Camilloni I, et al. 2018: Impacts of 1.5°C global warming on natural and human systems. In: Masson-Delmotte V, Zhai P, Pörtner HO, Roberts D, Skea J, Shukla PR, et al, editors. *Global warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*. In press. Available from: https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/sites/2/2019/06/SR15_Chapter3_High_Res.pdf. Accessed 2019 Oct 18.
2. *Global Climate Strike* [website]. 350.org; 2019. Available from: <https://globalclimatesstrike.net/#faq>. Accessed 2019 Oct 18.
3. Fridays For Future. *Map*. Fridays For Future; 2019. Available from: <https://www.fridaysforfuture.org/events/map?c=Canada&d=2019-09-27&o=all>. Accessed 2019 Oct 18.
4. Costello A, Abbas M, Allen A, Ball S, Bell S, Bellamy R, et al. Managing the health effects of climate change. *Lancet* and University College London Institute for Global Health Commission. *Lancet* 2009;373(9676):1693-733. Erratum in: *Lancet* 2009;373(9682):2200.
5. Sanborn M, Grierson L, Upshur R, Marshall L, Vakili C, Griffith L, et al. Family medicine residents' knowledge of, attitudes toward, and clinical practices related to environmental health. Multi-program survey. *Can Fam Physician* 2019;65:e269-77. Available from: <https://www.cfp.ca/content/cfp/65/6/e269.full.pdf>. Accessed 2019 Oct 18.
6. Lecomte AM. Des médecins mettent en garde contre la menace climatique pour la santé. *Radio-Canada* 2019 Apr 23. Available from: <https://ici.radio-canada.ca/nouvelle/1165785/protection-environnement-sante-publique-quebec-canada-changement-climatique>. Accessed 2019 Oct 18.
7. *Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment* [website]. Toronto, ON: Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment; 2017. Available from: <https://cape.ca>. Accessed 2019 Oct 18.

Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page 767.