

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH: NURSES AS DRIVERS OF CLIMATE ACTION

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Abstract

Changes to Earth's climate are occurring globally at unprecedented rates with significant impacts to human and population health, including increased likelihood of mental health illnesses, food and water insecurity, insect-borne and heat-related illnesses, and respiratory diseases. Those in the health sector are seeing the challenges patients and community members are experiencing as a result of current and projected climate threats. Health professionals, including nurses, have an opportunity to lead the charge to significantly improve society's response to climate change and foster the strategies needed to promote health. This article highlights the current work of the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments, a national nursing organization focused solely on environmental health concerns, in inspiring and empowering nurses across the country to engage in action to reduce their climate impact, move climate solutions forward, and improve the ability of health care institutions and communities to respond to the health impacts of climate change.

Keywords: climate change, nursing, environment, public health, global warming, health care

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The evidence indicating cause for concern related to a warming planet and changing climate is increasing. This forces society to evaluate the projected impacts of climate

change beyond a sole focus on the environmental effects. A focus area coming to the forefront of discussions on climate change is how human health will be impacted.

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

The current and projected health impacts resulting from a warming climate are substantial. These include respiratory and cardiac harm from extreme heat and air quality deterioration, increased risk of vector-borne disease from changes in geographic and behavior patterns of disease carrying insects, and mental health impacts from community displacement and social disruption (U.S. Global Change Research Program, 2014). Leadership at the World Health Organization identified climate change as a challenge that will impact the fundamental necessities for health: food, air, and water (World Health Organization, 2008). Similarly, key findings from the newly released Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change report indicate that inaction over the past quarter century has threatened human health and livelihoods (Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, 2017).

While discussions on climate change tend to be somber and discouraging, it is important to note that there are feasible solutions to address this issue, while simultaneously promoting health and a strong economy. Further, tackling climate change is an opportunity to protect health on a global scale. A number of health professions and organizations are embracing this sentiment and stepping up to ensure that health is prioritized in discussions on climate. Among the nursing profession, the Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments (ANHE) is working to increase awareness and engage nurses in moving climate solutions forward.

BACKGROUND: THE ALLIANCE OF NURSES FOR HEALTHY ENVIRONMENTS

The Alliance of Nurses for Healthy Environments (ANHE), a coalition of individual nurses and nursing organizations, is the only nursing organization focused solely on environmental health concerns. Using the Institute of Medicine's (1995) report, *Nursing*,

Health and the Environment as a guide for nursing practice, ANHE leads work in the areas of nursing education, research, practice, and advocacy/policy. ANHE works on a variety of environmental health issues, including chemical policy reform, toxics and water, and food sustainability. Currently, ANHE is working to bring attention to climate change as a health issue and the importance of nurses in amplifying this message.

CLIMATE AND HEALTH: THE ROLE OF NURSES

Several factors denote nurses as key to leading action on climate change across the health sector.

One, nurses are the largest group of health-care professionals (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). There are more than 4 million professionally active nurses in the United States (The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2017); together nurses can influence positive change.

Two, nurses are in every community. Nurses practice in a variety of settings, often in first line communities, and see the effect of the environment on health outcomes. Through their presence in hospitals, communities, and academia, to name a few, nurses have the ability to reach a large portion of the population.

Three, the nursing voice is trusted. As shown over the years in Gallup polls, people trust health professionals, with nurses consistently ranked as the most trusted profession (Gallup, 2017). As credible and influential communicators, nurses have the ability to educate and engage the public, patients, policy makers, and communities on climate change and to call for solutions that protect health.

Four, nurses are professionally obligated to address environmental concerns in practice. In the American Nurses Association (ANA) *Nursing: Scope and Standards of Practice*,

standard 17 indicates that the “registered nurse practices in an environmentally safe and healthy manner” (ANA, 2015, p. 84).

All these reasons were the driving force behind an ANHE-hosted roundtable discussion on climate change and health at the White House in May 2016 (see Figure 1). Present at the roundtable were representatives from sixteen national nursing organizations. Topics of discussions ranged from the implications of climate change on patient populations to the needed response from the nursing profession. From discussions, attendees determined a need for partnership and coordination among nursing organizations on this critical issue and the need to increase nursing awareness of climate and its effect on health in the profession.

NURSING COLLABORATIVE ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

In response to the roundtable, ANHE, in partnership with Climate for Health, an ecoAmerica program, formed the Nursing Collaborative on Climate Change and Health to provide that partnership and coordination among nurses. To launch the collaborative the following founding partners have joined on as signatories: the National Association of Hispanic Nurses, American Public Health Nurses Association, Nurse Alliance of Service Employees International Union Healthcare, Public Health Nursing Section of the American Public Health Association, and National Student Nurses Association. In a statement released on behalf of the collaborative members (<https://envirn.org/five-major-nursing-organizations-commit-to-climate-action/>), our organizations describe how the joint effort aims to inspire and empower nurses across the country to engage in action to both reduce their climate impact and improve the ability of health care institutions and communities to respond to the health impacts of climate change. Through advocating for the advancement of climate solutions in practice settings and at a local, state, and national



Figure 1: Representatives of national nursing organizations at the 2016 White House Climate and Health Roundtable

level, nursing organizations will bring attention to the need to address climate change as a health imperative.

NEXT STEPS FOR NURSES: WHAT YOU CAN DO

While climate change may not be a main priority for some health professionals, we have an opportunity to improve the health of our patients, communities, and future generations through taking action. There are a variety of ways nurses can become part of the solution, from engaging in community-oriented action to global action. At ANHE, our aim is to support nurses in making climate action an easy choice.

The first step is to get informed. Visit the ANHE website to learn how climate change impacts health and how nurses can get involved in promoting climate-friendly communities, health facilities, office settings, and academic institutions. Second, nurses must lead by example. Actions include forming green teams or sustainability department in hospitals, recycling and reducing waste in homes, and getting nursing organizations involved. Lastly, nurses need to raise awareness and spread the word. In talking with patients, colleagues, and nursing organizations, nurses can motivate and inspire others to take action.

Interested nurses are also encouraged to join ANHE's Global Nurses Climate Change Committee and participate in the monthly conference calls. To learn more, visit <https://envirn.org/climate-change/>. The website offers a variety of educational materials on environmental health issues, including the 2016 report *Climate Change, Health, and Nursing: A Call to Action*, and the award-winning, free, peer-reviewed, open-access textbook *Environmental Health in Nursing*.

Resources

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