



Perspective / Opinion

Climate Change is a Health Crisis and Climate Solutions are Health Solutions

By Karly Hampshire

For years, activists in the health community have been working to reframe the climate crisis not as an issue of drowning polar bears and endangered species, but as a deeply personal health crisis. That reframing is gaining traction, inspiring a growing movement of healthcare providers taking their professional oath into climate advocacy, as demonstrated by organizations like [Healthcare without Harm](#), [Physicians for Social Responsibility](#), and the [Global Consortium for Climate and Health Education](#) (GCCHE). Medical students in particular are acting as powerful agents of change in the climate crisis, advocating for curriculum reform, improved hospital sustainability practices, and policy changes at multiple levels.

In 2018, I began medical school at University of California San Francisco. That fall, as the destructive Camp Fire raged through Paradise, California, my classmates and I were ironically in our pulmonary block. Every day, we walked to school amidst an eerie dusk in N95 masks, inhaling record-breaking low-quality air. Nonetheless, there was no mention of the health effects of air pollution or wildfire smoke in our curriculum. It felt like a grave omission and a missed opportunity to address the impact of climate change on human health.

Several classmates and I were struck by how our lectures inside the classroom felt disconnected from the realities of the outside world. We felt that in the 21st century, medical schools should be training physicians who can prevent, diagnose, and manage the health consequences of environmental destruction, including climate change. We learned that desire for curriculum on climate change was widespread among medical students; [a research study](#) I led found that among 600 medical students at twelve geographically diverse U.S. medical schools, 84% of students believed that the health effects of climate change should be included in the core curriculum but only 13% believed that their medical school was currently providing adequate education on the topic.

This gap recognition spurred the development of the [Planetary Health Report Card](#), a metric-based, student-led initiative to inspire planetary health in medical schools. The report card evaluates medical schools on metrics in five categories—Curriculum, Research, Community Engagement and Advocacy, Support for Student-Led Initiatives, and Sustainability—functioning as a needs assessment tool and institutional advocacy tool. Since its original founding in 2019, the report card has been implemented at over sixty medical schools in five countries, catalyzing

institutional changes, including integrated climate curriculum and establishment of student groups, task forces, and new electives. Recognizing the need for interprofessional collaboration in the planetary health movement, development of report cards for nursing and pharmacy training programs is underway. In the near future, student-led teams will be able to pull climate and health resources from the GCCHE's [Climate Resources for Health Education](#) Initiative, which is compiling an open-access repository of climate and health learning objectives, cases, and slides.

The 2018 Lancet Countdown Report on Climate and Health reads, "Given that climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century, responding to this threat, and ensuring this response delivers the health benefits available, is the responsibility of the health profession; indeed, such a transformation will not be possible without it." Yet in spite of the significant health harms of climate change, and climate change's role in exacerbating underlying health inequities, healthcare systems, including medical education, contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. The stakes of the climate and ecological crisis could not be higher; the voices of health professionals and students are critical in advocating for a healthier, more equitable, and more sustainable future.

Karly Hampshire is a fourth-year medical student at the University of California, San Francisco planning to pursue a career in internal medicine, with interests in medical education and the health effects of climate change. She is the founder and co-director of the Planetary Health Report Card and is currently on a climate and health focused gap year with education, research, and advocacy threads.