

CMA – Quebec office submission

Climate governance in Quebec: For a better integration of the impact of climate change on health and the health care system

Submission to the Committee on Transportation and the Environment on *Bill 44: An act mainly to ensure effective governance of the fight against climate change and to promote electrification*

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Introduction

The Canadian Medical Association (CMA) and its Quebec office are pleased to provide this submission to the Committee on Transportation and the Environment on *Bill 44: An Act mainly to ensure effective governance of the fight against climate change and to promote electrification*. The CMA maintains that governance of the fight against climate change will not be effective unless it integrates the health impacts on the Quebec population. Physicians in Quebec, across Canada, and around the world have a unique role to play in helping advance government and public understanding of the health consequences of climate change and in supporting the development of effective public health responses. The CMA's submission provides recommendations to better prepare and mitigate the impacts of a changing climate on people's health and the health care system in Quebec.

How Climate Change Affects Health

The World Health Organization has identified climate change as the biggest threat to global health.

¹ In Canada, the immediate health effects of climate change are a growing concern. In this century, Canada will experience higher rates of warming in comparison to other countries around the world. Northern Canada, including northern Quebec (Nunavik), will continue to warm at more than triple the global rate. These warming conditions will lead to an increase in extreme weather events, longer growing seasons, melting of the permafrost, and rising sea levels.²

Physicians are at the front lines of a health care system that is seeing growing numbers of patients experiencing health problems related to climate change, including heat-related conditions, respiratory illnesses, infectious disease outbreaks and impacts on mental health. For example, the heat wave in southern Quebec in 2018 was linked to over 90 deaths.³

Examples of the extent of this issue include:

- The number of extremely hot days is expected to double or triple in some parts of Canada in the next 30 years and will lead to an increase in heat-related impacts (e.g., heat stroke, myocardial infarction, kidney failure, dehydration, stroke).⁴
- Air pollution contributes to approximately 2,000 early deaths each year in Quebec by way of heart disease, stroke, lung cancer, and respiratory disease (such as aggravated asthma).⁵
- An increase in vector-borne diseases such as Lyme disease has increased significantly in Quebec, with the number of cases increasing from 125 in 2014 to 338 in 2018.⁶
- Extreme weather events are increasing in frequency, intensity and duration across Quebec and can negatively impact mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress disorder),⁷ as well as place additional strain on the health care system.
- Increasing temperatures are affecting the ice roads used in winter, and other roads built on permafrost in northern Quebec, threatening food security.⁸

There are sub-populations that are more susceptible to the health-related impacts of climate change. For example, in northern Quebec, climate change is already increasing health risks from food insecurity due to decreased access to traditional foods, decreased safety of ice-based travel, and damage to critical infrastructure due to melting permafrost. For the rest of Canada, the health impacts vary by geographic region, but include a list of issues such as increased risk of heat stroke and death, increases in allergy and asthma symptoms due to a longer pollen season, mental health implications from severe weather events, and increases in infectious diseases, UV radiation, waterborne diseases and respiratory impacts from air pollution. ⁹

Seniors, infants and children, socially disadvantaged individuals, and people with existing medical conditions such as cardiovascular disease, are at greater risk of being affected by climate change. The susceptibility of a population to the effects of climate change is dependent on their existing vulnerabilities and their adaptive capacity. ^{10,11}



Figure 1. Examples of Health Impact of Climate Change in Canada⁵

Climate Change: A Health Emergency

Recent polls have demonstrated that Canadians are very concerned about climate change and its impact on health. A 2017 poll commissioned by Health Canada revealed that 79% of Canadians were convinced that climate change is happening, and of those people 53% accepted that it is a current health risk and 40% believe it will be a health risk in the future.¹² As well, a 2019 poll commissioned by Abacus Data reports that Quebecers are the most anxious about climate change and think about the climate more often than people living in the rest of Canada. The same poll reports that 59% of people in Quebec believe that climate change is currently an emergency and 12% reported that it will likely become an emergency in a few years.¹³ These numbers are not surprising considering the intensity and frequency of extreme weather events in Quebec in recent years.

The CMA believes climate change is a public health crisis. Over the past few years in Canada, there have been numerous extreme climate events, such as wildfires in British Columbia,

extreme heat waves in Quebec, and storm surges on the east coast. In southern Quebec, a changing climate has also increased the range of several zoonoses, including blacklegged ticks, which are vectors of Lyme disease.¹⁴

Physicians across Quebec are seeing patient outcomes affected by the changing climate and are advocating for change. The health impacts of climate change were raised at last year's COP25 meeting in Madrid, Spain, among an international group of leading environment and health stakeholders, including the CMA. The group collectively called on governments to broaden the scope of their climate change initiatives and investments to include health care.

A lack of progress in reducing greenhouse gas emissions and building adaptive capacity threatens both human lives and the viability of health systems, with the potential to disrupt core public health infrastructure and overwhelm health services, not to mention the economic and social costs. In Quebec, the research consortium Ouranos estimated in 2015 that extreme heat, Lyme disease, West Nile virus and pollen alone will cost the Quebec state an additional \$609 million to \$1,075 million,¹⁵ and could result in up to 20,000 additional lives lost within the next 50 years.

Canada is currently not on track to meet the international targets set out by the Paris Agreement.¹⁶ The 2019 report from Lancet Countdown, the largest international health and climate research consortium, states that continued inaction on meeting the targets set out by the Paris Agreement will result in the health of a child born today being impacted negatively by climate change at every stage of its life.

Recommendation 1:

The CMA recommends that adaptation and mitigation measures be prioritized to limit the effects of climate change on public health.

Hearing Health Care Professionals on Climate Change

Last June, the CMA was pleased with the announcement made by the Minister of the Environment and the Fight Against Climate Change, Benoit Charette, to create a task force to ensure effective governance of the fight against climate change, including meeting Quebec's international climate targets.¹⁷ Climate change crosses multiple sectors and requires experts from diverse backgrounds to create solutions to adapt and mitigate the impacts of climate change.

Considering the overwhelming evidence of the impacts of climate change on human health, it is paramount that a health representative sits on the committee that will be advising the Minister. Physicians and health professionals have a critical role to play in advancing public understanding of the potential impacts of climate change on health and promoting appropriate actions aimed at protecting the health of Canadians. Physicians believe that what's good for the environment is also good for human health. Protecting human health must be at the core of all environmental and climate change strategies within Quebec.

Recommendation 2:

The CMA recommends that a health representative sit on the committee that will be advising the minister.

Dedicated Funding for a Greener Health Care System

The 2019 Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change reports that Canada has the third-highest per capita greenhouse gas emissions coming from its health care sector in the world. Health care related emissions account for approximately 4.5% of the country's total emissions. Hospitals produce a significant proportion of health sector emissions as they are always on, are resource intensive, and have strict ventilation standards. Hospital services also produce large amounts of waste through the use of single-use items (e.g., hospital gowns and surgical supplies).

To remedy this problem, the CMA recommends that experts from research, education, clinical practice, and policy work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and that funding be dedicated to measuring the carbon footprint of different institutions and addressing these issues. Health care providers are uniquely positioned to advocate for innovative solutions that will help reduce greenhouse gas emissions by the health sector and improve public health.¹⁸ By reducing greenhouse gas emissions from the health system, the Quebec government will better position itself to be consistent with the timelines and goals of the Paris Agreement for zero-emissions for healthcare by 2050.¹⁹

Recommendation 3:

The CMA recommends that a portion of the Green Fund's budget be dedicated to the greening of health systems.

Conclusion

The CMA's submission highlights the need to better prepare and mitigate the health impacts of a changing climate, as well as the need for a health representative to advise the minister, and the allocation of funding for the greening of health systems in Quebec. Physicians are in a unique position to help the government develop strategies to mitigate the impacts of climate change and ultimately improve population health.

Summary of recommendations

Recommendation 1:

The CMA recommends that adaptation and mitigation measures be prioritized to limit the effects of climate change on public health.

Recommendation 2:

The CMA recommends that a health representative sit on the committee that will be advising the minister.

Recommendation 3:

The CMA recommends that a portion of the Green Fund's budget be dedicated to the greening of health systems.

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