

CMA submission

CMA Recommendations on Canada's First National Adaptation Strategy:

Addressing the health impacts of climate
change

June 23, 2022

Introduction

The World Health Organization has described climate change as “the greatest threat to health of the 21st century.” Climate change is negatively affecting the planet and the people on it, and its health impacts cannot be underestimated. A population’s susceptibility to the effects of climate change is dependent on existing vulnerabilities. Work needs to be done to mitigate the impacts of climate change and enhance our ability to adapt, including improving upon factors that are fundamental to good health, such as the social determinants of health.

The consequences of climate change in Canada have been particularly severe in the North, which is warming at approximately three times the global average. Northern Indigenous communities experience high rates of food insecurity because of unreliable access to and availability of traditional foods and unsafe conditions for hunting, fishing and harvesting. Their culture and way of life are directly threatened by climate change. Geographic isolation and lack of resources exacerbate this situation.

To deal with the numerous impacts of climate change on health, we need a robust health system that can adapt to increased demand for services.

Recommendations

As part of the National Adaptation Strategy, the Canadian Medical Association (CMA) calls for federal leadership to ensure that a whole-of-government and whole-of-Canada approach is taken to effectively respond to the shared reality of climate change impacts. We recommend that all levels of government work together to address this issue by adopting the following recommendations.

- 1) **Strengthen the public health system to improve the capacity of communities to adapt to climate change and ensure adequate surge capacity within Canada’s health system to handle the increase in climate change–related illnesses**

In Canada we have witnessed a rise in wildfires, extreme heat, droughts, floods and other weather-related events. These events have led to an increase in respiratory and heat-related illnesses, people being displaced from their homes and higher rates of infectious diseases such as Lyme disease. The toll this has taken on mental health is grave.

To deal with the future burden of climate change–related health issues we need to ensure the Canadian health care system has adequate capacity to assess climate risks and implement adaptive management strategies and that it has the surge capacity it requires to respond to climate-related emergencies and illnesses.

Additionally, the rebuilding of public health capacity, domestically and internationally, is widely regarded as the most important, cost-effective and urgently needed response to climate change. Public health has a key leadership role to play in responding and adapting to climate change, including tracking diseases and trends related to climate change, raising awareness of the health impacts of climate change and creating municipal/local heat-wave preparedness plans.

2) Improve the ability of the public to adapt to climate change and catastrophic weather events

Temperatures are rising across the globe, and Health Canada has noted that Canada is likely to experience higher rates of warming in this century than most other countries in the world. To enable the Canadian population to adapt to this new reality, a clinical and public health response plan that minimizes and anticipates the health impacts of heat now and in the future must be developed. Coordination between federal governmental departments, local governments and national institutions to standardize surveillance (e.g., forecasting impending climate events) and reporting of heat-related illness and deaths is imperative, as are communication strategies to inform the public about the threat of heat waves to health. A report recently submitted to the Chief Coroner of British Columbia¹ underscores the increasing severity of recent extreme heat events and how concerted measures must be taken to reduce heat-related deaths going forward.

3) Integrate health professionals into the emergency preparedness plans of government and public health authorities

The federal government should encourage the provinces and territories to include front-line health professionals in the development and implementation of emergency preparedness plans, so health systems are adequately informed and prepared to properly manage climate change–related health emergencies.

4) Fund, promote and be guided by Indigenous-led, land-based approaches that encourage adaptation to warming in Indigenous communities, with a focus on the North

Climate change disproportionately affects Indigenous communities, despite the fact that they are among the lowest contributors to greenhouse gas emissions. These communities understand and experience the climate crisis as an intensification of the environmental changes imposed on Indigenous Peoples by historic and ongoing processes of colonialism.

For many Indigenous communities, closeness to and intimacy with the land gives them a deep understanding of the impacts of climate change, which underpins the significance of supporting Indigenous climate leadership. Indigenous Peoples have demonstrated remarkable resilience in response to both social and environmental challenges, and we need to draw on their adaptability as well as their traditional knowledge in collaborating on solutions to address climate change.

5) Prioritize the health and equity impacts of all policies, focusing on those who are disproportionately affected by climate change

The impacts of climate change are exacerbated by pre-existing health and social inequities. The drivers of climate change and health inequities are often one and the same. Energy systems, land use, transportation, housing, agriculture and socioeconomic systems are key contributors to climate pollution and drivers of community living conditions. There is a need to strengthen not only health systems but also infrastructure (e.g., housing) to fully address the impacts of climate change on those disproportionately affected, including Indigenous Peoples, racialized populations, older adults, people with disabilities and those who are socially and economically disadvantaged. We must ensure that in our drive toward a carbon-neutral society we fully understand and address the health and equity implications of proposed policies and programs.

6) Chart a course for net zero emissions in health care by 2050

Health care services are essential services that support the health and well-being of Canada's population, but they consume significant amounts of energy and produce considerable waste that contributes to environment-related threats to human health. Per capita, Canada's health system has consistently been shown to have one of the largest carbon footprints in the world, and it is responsible for between 4% and 5% of all emissions in Canada.² Furthermore, our health care system ranks in the top 10 emitters worldwide³ and is the third-highest polluter per capita in the world.⁴

We must work toward environmentally responsible approaches to delivering health care without compromising patient care and safety. To this end, the CMA recommends that the federal government take the following actions:

- Work collaboratively with health stakeholders (including subnational governments) to move forward as quickly as possible to act upon Canada's COP26 pledge to develop climate-resilient and low-carbon health systems.
- Establish a sustainable health care initiative that assembles experts from research, education, clinical practice and policy to support Canada's health systems in reducing carbon emissions and preventing pollution-related deaths, consistent with the timelines and goals of the Paris Agreement and commitments made during COP26.

- Formally commit to measuring the carbon footprint of Canada’s health systems, developing metrics to establish baseline measures and taking targeted actions to reduce it.
- Promote methods of service delivery that support decarbonization of the patient pathway.

Conclusion

Canadians are already feeling the impacts of climate change on health. There is an urgent need to address these impacts by building future capacity within the health system that ensures the public is prepared for these changes, especially those who are inequitably affected by climate change, including Indigenous Peoples, racialized populations, older adults, people with disabilities and those who are socially and economically disadvantaged.

The health care sector has a part to play not only in helping individuals adapt to climate change and ensuring adequate capacity but also in mitigating its own impacts on the environment. As part of this country’s nationally determined contributions (NDCs) under the Paris Agreement, Canada has committed to moving toward net zero carbon emissions by 2050 through a combination of significantly reducing carbon emissions and carbon offsetting. Addressing the carbon footprint of the health sector is key to accomplishing this goal.

As we tackle the challenges associated with climate change that lie before us, we must ensure that our policies and actions do not cause further harm to those who are disproportionately affected by climate change. We can guard against potential harm by learning from, and collaborating with, these groups, including drawing on the wealth of ecological traditional knowledge and adaptation strategies within many Indigenous communities.

All levels of government need to act together to address the health and environmental impacts of climate change. By working together, in a coordinated response, we can implement strategies to mitigate the negative health effects of climate change and create a safer, healthier and more resilient environment.

References

¹British Columbia Coroners Service (BCCS). *Extreme heat and human mortality: a review of heat-related deaths in B.C. in summer 2021*. Victoria, BC: BCCS; 2022 June 7.

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² Desrosiers CP, Hackett F, McGregor D, Banasiak K, et al. *The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change Policy Brief for Canada*. Ottawa: The Lancet; 2020 Nov.

Available: <https://policybase.cma.ca/link/policy14382> (accessed 2022 Jun 23).

³ Vogel L. Canada's health system is among the least green. *CMAJ* 2019;191(48):E1342–3. Available: <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/cmaj/191/48/E1342.full.pdf> (accessed 2022 Jun 23).

⁴ Howard C, Buse C, Rose C, MacNeill A, Parkes M. *The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change policy brief for Canada*. Ottawa: The Lancet; 2019 Nov. Available:

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