



Statement for the Record
American College of Physicians
Hearing before the Natural Resources Committee
On
Climate Change: Impacts and the Need to Act
February 6, 2019

The American College of Physicians (ACP) is pleased to submit this statement for the record and appreciates the efforts of Chairman Grijalva and Ranking Member Bishop in convening this hearing on the impacts of climate change and the need to act. We would also like to thank the committee for inviting input from diverse stakeholders, and we are pleased to offer our clinician perspective on the health impacts of climate change, why it is an important issue for the medical community and patients, and how we all need to be part of finding a solution.

ACP is the largest medical specialty organization and the second-largest physician group in the United States. ACP members include 154,000 internal medicine physicians (internists), related subspecialists, and medical students. Internal medicine physicians are specialists who apply scientific knowledge and clinical expertise to the diagnosis, treatment, and compassionate care of adults across the spectrum from health to complex illness.

The Climate's Impact on Health

The World Health Organization estimates that “climate change will cause an additional 250,000 deaths per year from 2030 to 2050,” likely the result of malnourishment, malaria, diarrhea, and heat exposure related to climate change effects. ACP is deeply concerned about the negative impact that climate change is having on public health and patients, and that these effects will worsen without immediate action. For many patients, primary care physicians are the first point of contact with the healthcare system. That means they are often the first to see depression,

early signs of cancer or chronic disease, and help manage care for those with pre-existing conditions. They ensure patients get the right care, in the right setting, by the most appropriate health professional, in a coordinated way. The two specialties that provide the majority of adult primary care in the United States are family medicine and internal medicine.

Because physicians are on the front lines of patient care, they are witnessing – here and now -- the harmful health effects that climate change can and does have on the human body. These harmful effects include: higher rates of respiratory and heat-related illness, increased prevalence of vector-borne and waterborne diseases, food and water insecurity, and malnutrition, as outlined in ACP's 2016 position paper, [Climate Change and Health](#), published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*. People who are elderly, sick, or poor are especially vulnerable to these potential consequences. As climate change worsens, an increase in global temperature and frequency of heat waves will raise the risk of heat exhaustion. Asthma and other chronic lung conditions will be exacerbated by increased particulate matter and ground-level ozone in the atmosphere. Exposure to infectious disease from vectors such as mosquitoes and ticks has and will continue to escalate. An increase in heavy downpours and flooding in America and the world has already, and will continue to, lead to an increase in waterborne diseases. Extreme weather events will take a human toll through increased incidence of stress, anxiety and depression.

Action is Needed Now to Address Climate Change

An October 2018 [report](#) issued by the United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) says that unprecedented efforts need to be made in order to have a chance at avoiding catastrophic effects from climate change in the near future. The report cites more than 6,000 scientific references, with contributions from thousands of expert and government reviewers worldwide. Ninety-one authors and review editors from 40 countries prepared the IPCC report in response to an invitation from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) when it adopted the Paris Agreement in 2015.

In November 2018, three additional reports were released citing the alarming effects of climate change: the [Lancet Countdown on climate change and health: shaping the health of nations for centuries](#), the 2018 [Emissions Gap Report](#) from the United Nations, and findings from the [Fourth National Climate Assessment](#).

ACP supports a number of the Lancet report's recommendations to address climate change, including the need for climate change research funding, increased efforts to curtail global emissions of greenhouse gases that are harmful to the environment and public health, increased education for physicians on climate change and its impact on human health, and the adoption of environmentally sustainable and energy-efficient practices to prepare for the impacts of climate change and ensure continued operations during periods of high patient demand.

In its 2016 position paper, ACP outlines recommendations (noted below) that can and should be taken on a global scale, by the health care sector, by the medical community specifically, and by government entities to reduce the harmful impact of climate change:

- A global effort is required to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions and address the health impact of climate change. The United States must commit to taking both a leadership and collaborative role in developing, implementing, and ensuring the success of such a global effort and in reducing its own contributions to greenhouse gas emissions. For this reason, ACP is opposed to withdrawing the United States from the Paris Agreement. Climate change adaptation strategies must be established, and mitigation measures, like switching to clean, renewable energy and promoting active transportation, must be adopted.
- The health care sector, within the United States and globally, must implement environmentally sustainable and energy-efficient practices and prepare for the impacts of climate change to ensure continued operations during periods of elevated patient demand.

- Physicians, both individually and collectively, are encouraged to advocate for climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and communicate about the health co-benefits of addressing climate change in objective, simple language to their community and policymakers. For its part, the American College of Physicians is committed to working with its international chapters and with other professional membership and public health organizations within the United States and globally to pursue the policies recommended in this paper.
- Physicians are encouraged to become educated about climate change, its effect on human health, and how to respond to future challenges. Medical schools and continuing medical education providers should incorporate climate change–related coursework into curricula.
- Governments should commit to providing substantial and sufficient climate change research funding to understand, adapt to, and mitigate the human health effects of climate change.

The Co-benefits of Climate Change Mitigation

By tackling climate change through policy reforms and other efforts, we have an opportunity to dramatically improve human health and avert dire environmental outcomes at the same time. Co-benefits arising from greenhouse gas emission reduction policies include improved respiratory health from better air quality and reduced heart disease from walking and using other environmentally friendly active transportation. Rapid phase-out of fossil fuel use will mitigate climate change and benefit human respiratory and cardiovascular health. By shifting to healthier diets rich in legumes, fruits, and vegetables, environmental and health benefits could be realized. Creating urban green spaces and utilizing energy-efficient building strategies could also have substantial co-benefits to health and the environment.

The Fourth National Climate Assessment states that “By the end of this century, thousands of American lives could be saved and hundreds of billions of dollars in health-related economic benefits gained each year under a pathway of lower greenhouse gas emissions.” Addressing

climate change is an opportunity to prevent negative health impacts on patients and public health, as well as adverse environmental outcomes.

The Role of Physicians in Addressing Climate Change

Physicians can play a substantial role by advocating for climate change adaptation and mitigation policies and educating themselves about climate change and how it affects public and individual health, and the potential health threats posed to their communities.

ACP is a founding member of the [Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health](#) which brings together 22 medical associations representing approximately 550,000 clinical practitioners. There are also 29 public health and science-based affiliates representing a million and a half members. ACP and the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health are building capacity on advancing racial equity in their collaborative work towards mitigating the health effects of climate change by developing strategies to achieve equitable climate resilience outcomes. The organizations have been selected for participation in the new Racial Equity Learning Program under the Kresge Foundation's Environment Program, which is a new, capacity-building program to help grantee organizations deepen knowledge and skills on incorporating equity, diversity, and inclusion in their climate resilience work. More than 100 individuals from 49 partner organizations will participate in the program which runs from September 2018-August 2019. The goal of the program is for participants to gain a deeper understanding of racial equity competencies so that they can operationalize their commitment to racial equity and apply an equity lens to their work, organizations, and climate resilience practices.

ACP has also developed a [Climate Change and Health Action Plan](#) that provides resources and tools to help physicians reduce energy use and greenhouse gas emissions in their practices.

ACP is aware of a new blueprint for climate change, called the Green New Deal, which was introduced this month in Congress by Sen. Ed Markey (D-MA) and Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY). While we believe it is appropriate and necessary for Congress to go on record on

the importance of addressing the climate change crisis, and to enact legislation to mitigate and prevent the catastrophic impact of climate change on human health (and to reverse administration policies that undermine these objectives), we do not have policy on each and every one of the goals, projects and requirements reportedly included in the non-binding resolution. ACP looks forward to engaging with lawmakers on the issue of climate change in the 116th Congress and looks forward to advancing legislation that specifically addresses the health impacts of climate change as aligned with our policy.

Conclusion

ACP greatly appreciates the committee convening this hearing and for its desire to hear from stakeholders – from all sectors and all demographics -- on the impact of climate change. We hope our clinician perspective is helpful and constructive in this ongoing effort to help mitigate the effects of climate change. The U.S. should be taking even more aggressive action now to protect the health of our community's most vulnerable members—including our children, our seniors, people with chronic illnesses, and the poor. Our climate *is* changing and our health is suffering as a result. People are being harmed. Our planet is in danger. Please contact Jonni McCrann at jmccrann@acponline.org with any questions or if additional information is needed.