



Office of the Chief Medical Health Officer

204 – 310 Idylwyld Drive North

Saskatoon, SK S7L 0Z2

Phone: 655-4338 Fax: 655-4414

September 28, 2009

Colleagues,

I am writing at a critical time in our history, with an essential but perhaps unusual message.

In less than 100 days, 192 countries will meet to thrash out a new global agreement to avert catastrophic climate change. This is a historical occasion, the outcome of which will shape the course of human health and development into the future. Post the Copenhagen negotiations, we must immediately embark on a massive cultural transformation – one that rapidly yields a low carbon future, and peace, prosperity and health for all.

If we are to succeed, we must all play our part – including those of us in public health leadership.

As health professionals, we have an essential role and capacity to contribute to the collective response to climate change.

We should be especially concerned about the effects of climate change on human health. They are many and potentially severe. At its worst, climate change will cause death and disease for hundreds of millions of people worldwide. In Canada, we are relatively better protected from these health effects, at least in the near-term, but we are not immune. Moreover, we have all committed to **primum non nocere** – to “first, do no harm”. In upholding our commitment, we must take aggressive action to slow and preferably prevent the massive harm that climate change threatens to cause.

As highly respected and trusted professionals with a reach and prominence in communities across Canada, we have the opportunity to promote positive changes on many levels. This includes by adding our voices to the calls for stronger climate protection policies at all levels of government, by working toward healthier public policy more generally, by greening the health care system (which is a massive energy user and polluter in its own right) and by actively participating in reshaping the cultural underpinnings that are at the root of the climate crisis. These are all essential contributions for resolving the climate crisis, and should be essential to our good health professional practice.

Healthiest people ~ Healthiest communities ~ Exceptional service

The good news, if we can call it that, is that our work on climate change is very much complementary to our work on many other important health issues that we have embraced. Former California Health Officer Dr. Richard Jackson speaks incisively to this fact: "What's good for our kids and their health and what's good for their neighbourhood, school, and our city, state, nation and planet are all the same thing".

I urge us all to embrace the climate change issue and to act on it however appropriate, both in our individual capacity as citizens and in our unique capacity as health professionals. I include, for your consideration, several suggested actions that we as physicians could take to make progress in this area:

- include chapters and sections in our health status reports on climate change, and recommend policy changes at the local, provincial and national levels;
- write letters of support to political leaders urging them to support strong climate legislation;
- discuss and participate in sustainability initiatives in our communities and with Health Boards or municipal governments;
- speak to media on the issue;
- sponsor staff education events to build awareness about health effects of climate change;
- build internal capacity to adapt to climate change, including for example by hiring people with climate change & health expertise or by strengthening collaborations with universities;

As with many issues, the health effects of climate change will likely be disproportionately felt by those who are most disadvantaged in both the developed and the developing world. It is our moral obligation as health professionals to support and protect the vulnerable, and advocate to decrease inequities where possible. I thank you in advance for considering how you can help in these efforts within your sphere of influence.

Sincerely and for the good of us all,

Cordell Neudorf
B.Sc., M.D., M.H.Sc., FRCPC
Chief Medical Health Officer