Global Warming, Health Disparities, and Social Capital

How diverse patterns among regions have revealed new and troubling health news. Recognizing the role of social determinants and lingering structural inequities, researchers at UCSF are bringing new attention to the health impacts of climate change in communities where the health disparities are greatest, including African American and Latino communities.

Health disparities in the United States have been linked to both infectious disease and chronic conditions. Several studies have also shown that exposure to environmental hazards is significant in contributing to poor health outcomes in these vulnerable communities. Rebecca Alster, social epidemiologist at UCSF, found that Latinxs in San Francisco are disproportionately exposed to air pollution and other environmental hazards. These exposures contribute to increased risk of chronic diseases such as asthma and heart disease, which are further exacerbated by neighborhood characteristics such as overcrowding and poverty.

It’s clear that climate change presents a unique challenge to these communities, but the good news is that efforts to reduce carbon emissions can also help address these disparities. By reducing greenhouse gas output, this is just one example of how solutions to global warming are also solutions to health disparities.

The health impacts of global warming, the roots and manifestations of COVID-19 infection, and structural racism are intertwined. Can we begin to imagine a shared response to the enormity of this crisis? Can we begin to imagine a world where environmental justice and health equity are intersectional? Can we begin to imagine a world where we take action? Can we begin to imagine a world where we have a collective intake of breath….and a reset of business as usual.

In June 2020, the US PHS launched a National Strategy for Public Health Action on Climate Change and Health. The Climate Health Action Plan sets a course for USPHS to work across the health sector to address climate change. The plan is built on three pillars: 1) reducing the health sector’s carbon footprint, 2) building health sector resilience, and 3) building health sector capacity.

Climate Health Links
National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
National Institute on Aging
U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
U.S. Global Change Research Program
World Health Organization

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UCSF Climate Health Newsletter
Welcome to the Summer edition of the UCSF Climate Health Newsletter, which highlights the activities of two of UCSF’s core climate health initiatives: the Climate Health Now (CHN) program’s new, NIEHS-funded UCSF Program on Reproductive Health and the Environment and the “Evolving Public Health Strategies for the 21st Century” research project.

The Bay Area Chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility has a very active environmental committee, including local health care professionals. See their calendar of upcoming events to learn about opportunities to get involved. Thoroughly committed to identifying and addressing the role of environmental factors in health, this committee hosts meetings and events for medical professionals interested in a sustainable environment. To subscribe to their newsletter, please visit their website.

On Monday, Sept. 14th, the UCSF Climate Health Now (CHN) program’s new, NIEHS-funded UCSF Program on Reproductive Health and the Environment will host a series of events focused on creating awareness and enacting change at the intersection of climate change and health.

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