

Tackling climate change: the greatest opportunity for global health



"Tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century."¹ This finding, the central message of the second *Lancet* Commission on Health and Climate Change, attempts to answer the stark conclusion of the first *Lancet* Climate Change Commission, published in 2009—namely, that "Climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century."²

When climate change is framed as a health issue, rather than purely as an environmental, economic, or technological challenge, it becomes clear that we are facing a predicament that strikes at the heart of humanity. Health puts a human face on what can sometimes seem to be a distant threat. By making the case for climate change as a health issue, we hope that the civilisational crisis we face will achieve greater public resonance. Public concerns about the health effects of climate change, such as undernutrition and food insecurity, have the potential to accelerate political action in ways that attention to carbon dioxide emissions alone do not.

To facilitate action to address the threat of climate change, our 2015 Commission on Health and Climate Change³ provides nine recommendations for governments to consider. They include: scaling up financing for climate-resilient health systems worldwide; ensuring a rapid phase out of coal from the global energy mix; encouraging a transition to cities that support and promote healthy lifestyles for the individual and the planet; establishing the framework for a strong, predictable, and international carbon pricing mechanism; rapidly expanding access to renewable energy in low-income and middle-income countries; ensuring adequate local capacity and political support to develop low-carbon healthy energy choices; adopting mechanisms to facilitate collaboration between Ministries of Health and other government departments and empowering health professionals; agreeing and implementing an international agreement which supports countries in transitioning to a low-carbon economy; and investing in climate change and public health research.

Despite the optimism of the Commission, we recognise and acknowledge a widespread lack of

awareness of climate change as a health issue. To overcome this gap in understanding, the 2015 *Lancet* Commission proposes the formation of an independent, international Countdown to 2030: Global Health and Climate Action coalition to monitor progress and action on the health dimensions of the climate crisis. Health professionals have a vital part to play in tackling the health impacts of climate change. The Commission calls on health professionals to lead the response to the health threats of climate change.

Tackling the health threats of climate change will also need an international multidisciplinary approach. The 2015 *Lancet* Commission represents a unique collaboration between European and Chinese academics, involving climate, social, political, and environmental scientists, geographers, experts in biodiversity and energy policy, engineers, economists, and, of course, health professionals. The *Lancet* Commission on Health and Climate Change has been led by both the University College London Institute for Global Health in the UK and Tsinghua University in China, with working meetings held and launch events planned in both London and Beijing. *The Lancet* has sought to foster collaboration between great universities and research institutes globally to address these neglected but serious threats to human health. We have pledged our long-term support to the work of the two *Lancet* Climate Change

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Commissions. We will continue to engage actively in the campaign to address the health threats of climate change, using the best available science as a platform for our advocacy work. We will also continue our strategic collaboration with Commissioners and report the work of the Countdown to 2030 project every 2 years.

Climate change is the defining challenge of our generation. Health professionals must mobilise now to address this challenge and protect the health and wellbeing of future generations.

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- 1 Watts N, Adger WN, Agnolucci P, et al. Health and climate change: policy responses to protect public health. *Lancet* 2015; published online June 23. [http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(15\)60854-62](http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(15)60854-62).
- 2 Costello A, Abbas M, Allen A, et al. Managing the health effects of climate change: *Lancet* and University College London Institute for Global Health Commission. *Lancet* 2009; **373**: 1693–733.