

Position Statement

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

CNA POSITION

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) believes that, as changes in our climate continue worldwide, nurses¹ have a role in supporting adaptation and mitigation with respect to climate change through nursing practice, research, administration, education and policy. An Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report (2014) concluded unequivocally that our climate has been changing since the mid-20th century, in response to human activities, and that human health is affected by them.

The CNA *Code of Ethics for Registered Nurses* supports nursing action on climate change:

There are broad aspects of social justice that are associated with health and well-being and that ethical nursing practice addresses. These aspects relate to the need for change in systems and societal structures in order to create greater equity for all. Nurses should endeavour as much as possible, individually and collectively, to advocate for and work toward eliminating social inequities by: . . . Supporting environmental preservation and restoration and advocating for initiatives that reduce environmentally harmful practices in order to promote health and well-being [and] Maintaining awareness of broader global health concerns such as . . . environmental pollution. (2008, pp. 20-21)

CNA believes that Canadian nurses need to promote climate change adaptation (that is, responding to the effects of climate change) and mitigation (taking action to reduce it), since changes in health are already a severe consequence for individuals, families and communities.

Nurses are uniquely qualified to proactively support such adaptation and mitigation. They have the necessary scientific background and communication skills to explain climate change to the public. Their expertise in health promotion and behaviour change also equips them to foster lifestyle choices that support health under changing climatic conditions.

CNA believes that the nursing profession plays an integral role in helping individuals, families and communities adapt to climate change. Nurses have a long history of promoting positive adjustments to major life changes, such as the birth of a child or the

¹ Unless otherwise stated, *nurse* or *nursing* refers to any member of a regulated nursing category (i.e., a registered nurse, nurse practitioner, licensed/registered practical nurse or registered psychiatric nurse). This definition reflects the current situation in Canada, whereby nurses are deployed in a variety of collaborative arrangements to provide care.

Summary

There is strong evidence that actions taken to mitigate GHG emissions — even in the face of continuous population growth — are far more cost-effective than allowing CO₂ levels to rise while postponing any ameliorative actions (National Round Table on the Environment and the Economy, 2011). Delaying action on emissions may result in more costly efforts in the future and will have an increasingly negative effect on the economy. Insufficient action on climate change will also have harmful effects on the health status of vulnerable Canadians.² It will increase their exposure to the adverse effects of climate change and worsen health outcomes over the long term. Climate change is altering global patterns of disease, and its health effects are expected to last long after any programs to adapt and mitigate them (Samet, 2010). Action against climate change is therefore important for short- and long-term global population health.

Nurses, who focus on the health and well-being of individuals, families and communities, are a trusted source of information. As such, they are in a good position to support adaptation to climate change and evaluate how vulnerabilities within a population may evolve in the course of coping with its effects. As a profession, nurses can and should support the types of policies and lifestyle changes that will reduce GHG emissions and improve the health and well-being of all people in Canada. Nurses can also participate in policy discussions on corporate and industrial contributions to climate change and provide nursing leadership on policies aimed at minimizing its results. CNA believes that nurses, by working together, can help address the significant threat climate change poses to the health of the planet we all depend on to live.

BACKGROUND

Climate change affects all basic life systems (i.e., air, water, health, shelter and security) and poses a significant threat to human health and survival (Gould & Rudolph, 2015). The health consequences of climate change are now considered a collective syndrome, as these no longer produce singular health events and have reached all parts of the world. While populations are affected in different ways,³ the effects of climate change are evident in shifting ecosystems, food availability and the frequency and severity of extreme weather events (McMichael, 2013). Climate change is also a social justice issue. People in mid-latitude regions must face the effects of climate change despite having lower CO₂ emission rates per capita than the industrialized world. Likewise, populations with existing health risks based on socioeconomic factors will be disproportionately affected as environmental health declines (International Energy Agency, 2015).

² Vulnerable populations in Canada include infants and children, seniors, Indigenous populations, “resource-dependent and remote communities,” people with low incomes, pregnant women, and people with compromised health status (Health Canada, 2008, p.15).

³ This is not to say that climate change effects all areas equally.

Vulnerable populations in Canada are experiencing health effects from heat, poor outdoor air quality, changes in traditional ways of life and extreme weather events. Without collective efforts to address climate change, it is likely that these effects will continue to worsen.

Adapting to climate change will continue to evolve over time as the variability of its effects continue. Such adaptation includes education and awareness campaigns, water conservation and treatment systems, reusable energy sources, and infrastructure systems like heat and air-conditioning. Yet, adaptation methods should not be regarded as fixed solutions, since further strategies may be needed in the future to cope with the intensifying effects of climate change (Dilling, Daly, Travis, Wilhelmi, & Klein, 2015).

Mitigation of climate change refers to the reduction of GHG emissions through multiple strategies to decrease the use of fossil fuels while increasing the use of alternate energy and sustainable resources (Barrett, Charles, & Temte, 2014). Mitigation efforts may also influence individuals, communities and the environment at different levels: actions to reduce GHGs may negatively affect health and other fields, such as the economy, or else be more effective in the short-term while hindering results over the long term (Chalabi & Kovats, 2014). Thus, to be most effective, mitigation efforts require balance and collaboration between the health sector and multiple communities, industries and governments.

The federal government has amended the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*, multiple times to reflect greater awareness and research on environmental issues. It now includes regulations to achieve cleaner air and to restrict chemical substance waste, biofuel production and plastic microbeads in personal care products.⁴

Since the Canadian government's original action plan in 2007, many resources and commitments on climate change have emerged. Canada's national, international, provincial and territorial action plans have multiplied as the urgency of addressing climate change has become indisputable.⁵ For example, several provinces and territories have become members of the [Climate Registry](#), following British Columbia, which was one of its founding partners in 2007. In 2015, Canada joined 194 countries in signing the Paris Agreement,⁶ which outlines collaborative promises to respond to the ever-growing threat of climate change. The global community is affected by climate change and must continue to work collaboratively to reduce GHG emissions and improve environmental and human health.

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⁴ Information on the health implications of the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act* is available from the Environment and Climate Change Canada [website](#).

⁵ See [Canada's Way Forward on Climate Change](#) on the Government of Canada website.

⁶ See the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change [website](#) for further information.

References:

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Also see:

CNA position statements:

Nurses and Environmental Health (2009)

[*Toward an Environmentally Responsible Canadian Health Sector*](#) (joint position statement, 2009)

International Council of Nurses position statements:

[Health Care Waste: Role of Nurses and Nursing](#) (2010)

[Nurses, Climate Change and Health](#) (2008)

[Reducing Environmental and Lifestyle Related Health Hazards](#) (2011)

Replaces:

Climate Change and Health (2009)

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