

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH

CNA POSITION

The Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) believes that changes in our climate are occurring worldwide and that nurses¹ have a role in supporting adaptation to and mitigation of climate change through nursing practice, research, administration, education and policy. The most recent report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) concluded unequivocally that our climate is changing in response to human activities and that human health is being affected by these changes.²

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: ...vi. Supporting environmental preservation and restoration and advocating for initiatives that reduce environmentally harmful practices in order to promote health and well-being.³

CNA believes that Canadian nurses face a very real choice between getting involved now, by promoting climate change adaptation (that is, responding to the effects of climate change) and mitigation (that is, taking action to reduce climate changes), or waiting until the increasingly severe health effects of climate change are felt by the individuals, families and communities with whom they work.

Nurses are uniquely qualified to support adaptation to and mitigation of climate change. They have both the necessary scientific background and the communication skills to explain climate change to the public. Their expertise in health promotion and behaviour change also equips them to foster lifestyle choices, at the individual, family and community level, that support health under changing climatic conditions.

CNA believes that the nursing profession plays an integral role in supporting individuals, families and communities in adapting to climate change. Nurses have a long history of promoting positive adaptations to major life changes, such as the birth of a child or the diagnosis of a chronic illness, and have increased communities' capacity to adapt to a range of stressors. Nurses can use this expertise to support adaptation to climate change.

CNA believes that the visibility of the risks of climate change is now so great that mitigation measures are more acceptable than they would have been even a few years ago and that nurses have the skills to support these measures. One of the areas where Canada's more than 250,000 nurses can have enormous influence is in promoting behavioural

¹ Unless otherwise stated, *nurse* or *nursing* refers to any member of a regulated nursing category (i.e., a registered nurse, 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.

² (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007a)

³ (Canadian Nurses Association [CNA], 2008, p. 20)

changes by Canadians to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Emissions from the transportation, heating, consumer products and commercial products sectors can be reduced by the choices that consumers make.⁴

Encouraging individuals to change their behaviour must be coupled with lobbying all levels of government to be socially responsible in creating structures and policies that enable Canadians to live healthier lives. Examples of such structures and policies include accessible and effective public transport systems, infrastructure for bicycle lanes and pedestrian zones, provincial and federal income tax incentives for “green” choices and the adoption of environmental and social justice frameworks for sustainable development and urban planning.

Nurses and their professional associations are also aware that many consumer choices intended to produce fewer GHGs are also good for health. For example, walking or cycling to work rather than driving promotes cardiovascular fitness, driving at the posted speed limit is safer than speeding, and insulating homes properly helps prevent the growth of mould.

Although activities aimed at encouraging individuals to change their behaviour are helpful in reducing emissions, CNA also believes that businesses, including those in the health sector, must take responsibility for their own production of GHGs. To support efforts to reduce GHG emissions within the health sector, as well as the manufacturing and industrial sectors, CNA believes that advocating for environmentally responsible policies is an effective way to mitigate climate change.

Now is a good time for nurses to be acting on climate change policy, given the debates and negotiations on this topic that are occurring in all jurisdictions of Canada. CNA believes that nurses can become involved in influencing policy related to climate change by:

- showing leadership in changing their personal practices to reduce their own contributions to GHG emissions;
- encouraging their professional associations to support policy efforts to reduce GHG emissions;
- working with coalitions of non-governmental organizations to identify where their support will be most useful; and
- reviewing the progress of *Turning the Corner: An Action Plan to Reduce Greenhouse Gases and Air Pollution*, at the Environment Canada website: www.ecoaction.gc.ca/turning-virage/index-eng.cfm.

CONCLUSION

There is strong evidence that achieving early reductions in emissions will be far more cost-effective than allowing carbon dioxide (CO₂) levels in the atmosphere to continue to rise and postponing any ameliorative actions.⁵ Delaying action on emissions may mean that future efforts will be much more costly and will have an increasingly negative effect on the economy. Insufficient action on climate change now will also have harmful effects on the health status of vulnerable Canadians.⁶ Over the long term, delays in acting will increase the number of families living in poverty and will lead to a worsening of their health outcomes.

⁴ (IPCC, 2007b)

⁵ (United Kingdom Treasury, 2006)

⁶ Vulnerable populations are defined as “groups include children, older people, people with low incomes, pregnant women, people with compromised health status, and those people living in Canada’s North” (Health Canada, 2005, p. 2.6.2).



Nurses, who focus on the health and well-being of the individuals, families and communities with whom they work, represent a trusted source of information. As such, they are well positioned to support adaptation to climate change. As a profession, nurses can, and should, support the types of policy instruments and lifestyle changes that will reduce GHG emissions and improve the health and well-being of all Canadians. CNA believes that, by working together, nurses can help address the significant threat of climate change to the health of the planet on which we all depend for the requirements of life.

BACKGROUND

“Climate change threatens the basic elements of life for people around the world – access to water, food, health, and the use of land and the environment.”⁷ Changes in climate have led to increases in the prevalence of malnutrition and diarrhea that already existed in low-income countries. Climate change is a social justice issue, as people living in mid-latitude regions are having to deal with the effects of climate change, even though their per capita CO₂ emissions are far lower than those of people living in the developed world.⁸ Vulnerable populations in Canada are also experiencing health effects from heat, poor outdoor air quality, changes in traditional ways of life and extreme weather events. It is likely that these effects will worsen with increasing changes in our climate.

Adaptation to climate has always included “physiological acclimatization, behavioural strategies (such as clothing, scheduling daily work, and seasonal migration), technical measures (such as building design and air-conditioning), as well as institutional mechanisms (such as establishing disaster preparedness schemes).”⁹ What is changing now is the pace of climate change, which may overcome the capacity of populations to adapt.

Mitigation of climate change refers to reducing GHG emissions to reduce the associated hazards.¹⁰ In effect, this means reducing the consumption of fossil fuels and promoting forestry and agricultural measures that increase the uptake of CO₂ by so-called carbon sinks. Burton, Smith, Ebi and Scheraga have proposed that “the extent to which society is willing to expend resources to avoid the effects of climate change will depend in part on its perceptions of the risks posed by climate change, the perceived costs of the effort, ability to pay, and how much it is willing to risk possible negative consequences.”¹¹

In October 2006, the federal government announced clean air regulations within existing acts such as the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*.¹² The government specified the context for these regulations by noting that Canada’s performance on air emissions had, for well over a decade, lagged behind that of most of the other countries in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

⁷ (Dietz, Hope, Stern & Zenghelis, 2007, p. 129)

⁸ (International Energy Agency, 2006)

⁹ (Fussel, Klein & Ebi, 2006, p. 42)

¹⁰ (McBean, 2005)

¹¹ (Burton, Smith, Ebi & Scheraga, 2005, p. 283).

¹² For more information on the health implications of the *Canadian Environmental Protection Act*, see the Health Canada website: www.hc-sc.gc.ca/iyh-vsv/environ/cepa-lcpe_e.html.



In April 2007, the federal government released *Turning the Corner: An Action Plan to Reduce Greenhouse Gases and Air Pollution*, which outlines proposed regulations in this area. This action plan represents the first time that measures to regulate emissions have been included in efforts to promote the reduction of GHGs. Several provinces and territories have also been active in this area. For example, British Columbia took the lead by joining 30 U.S. states and a Native American tribe, among others, in forming the Climate Registry,¹³ which will help British Columbia and other members to track their progress in reducing emissions.

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¹³ For more information on the Climate Registry, visit www.theclimateregistry.org.



Also see:

Related CNA position statement:

Joint CNA/CMA Position Statement on Environmentally Responsible Activity in the Health-Care Sector (2009)

Related International Council of Nurses position statements:

Nurses, Climate Change and Health (2008)

Reducing Environmental and Lifestyle Related Health Hazards (2007)

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