

# HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

## Implications for Members



### SUMMARY

---

The 2019 report of the *Lancet* Countdown on Health and Climate Change states that the health sector is responsible for approximately 4.6% of global greenhouse gas emissions. In HealthCareCAN's first issue brief for members of 2020, we examine the 2019 *Lancet* Countdown report for guidance to help hospitals and health organizations transition toward a greener future. This follows our [Pre-budget Brief](#) concerning green healthcare as the missing piece in Canada's climate response.

### CURRENT SITUATION

---

Climate change is one of the greatest global threats facing our world today. The last decade was the hottest in recorded history<sup>1</sup> and there is little optimism among climate scientists that there is a foreseeable end to the record-breaking rising global temperatures. We are witnesses to or have faced the devastation caused by the climate crisis – heat waves, wildfires, floods, intense storms – and can appreciate the impact it will have on Canada's health care system.

---

<sup>1</sup> NASA/National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). 2020. Annual Global Analysis for 2019.

The World Health Organization calls climate change the greatest threat to human health in the 21<sup>st</sup> century<sup>2</sup>. Worsening air pollution, e.g. from wildfires, is anticipated to exacerbate the frequency and severity of asthma attacks and other respiratory diseases. 2.9 million premature deaths globally were attributed to air pollution in 2016.

In Canada alone, air pollution is responsible for an estimated 14,000 premature deaths each year. In Canada's Arctic, melting permafrost threatens to disrupt access to traditional Indigenous food and risk already precarious food security. Not to mention, in a warming world we can expect a growing prevalence of mood and stress-related disorders associated with the loss of homes, communities, and livelihoods due to extreme weather events.

Climate change was a leading issue for voters in the 2019 federal election. Most of the major parties made climate action core to their platforms. The Liberal government made extensive reference to the need to combat the climate crisis in the [Speech from the Throne](#). Nevertheless, Canada is not on target to meet our 2030 emissions reduction commitment under the Paris Agreement, pledging to keep rising global temperatures well below 2°C.

Policymakers must understand that for Canada to meet our commitments under the Paris Agreement, the health sector must play a critical role.

According to the 2019 report of the [Lancet Countdown<sup>3</sup> on Health and Climate Change](#), the health sector is responsible for approximately 4.6% of global greenhouse gas emissions. If we single-out hospitals from the equation, from a national perspective, hospitals in Canada collectively account for more than 5% of Canada's greenhouse gas footprint, making them the most energy-intensive public facilities in Canada. This is largely because of the size of the sector and the fact that the healthcare system, principally hospitals, operate 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year, often at or above capacity.

The 2019 report of the *Lancet Countdown* describes a future – if no or minimal action is taken – in which a child born today will experience a world that is more than 4°C warmer than the pre-industrial average. As aforementioned, human lives will be impacted by food insecurity and undernutrition, infectious diseases, air pollution, heatwaves, as well as an increase in frequency and severity of natural disasters. The climate crisis will impact human health from infancy and adolescence to adulthood and old age and the already overburdened health care system will be placed under increasing and overwhelming pressure.

The 2019 *Lancet Countdown* report stresses that adaptation to climate change is essential, even with the most ambitious mitigation efforts. The report notes that while recognition of the need for health adaptation to climate change is widespread and an increasing number of countries are generating evidence-based material to influence policy prioritization, funding decisions guided by the facts and figures remains an issue.

Climate change adaptation and mitigation efforts will help ease the health impacts associated with global warming, in addition to, reducing the health sector's own carbon footprint. In fact, as the 2019 report of the *Lancet Countdown* explains, placing health at the centre of climate action will yield enormous dividends for the public and the economy. This includes cleaner air, healthier plant-based diets, improved active transportation, and as a result, significant health care savings.

---

<sup>2</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). 2016. WHO Director General keynote address at the Human Rights Council panel discussion on climate change and the right to health.

<sup>3</sup> The *Lancet Countdown* is an international, multidisciplinary collaboration dedicated to monitoring the evolving impacts of climate change on human health and providing an independent assessment of the delivery of commitments made by governments worldwide under the Paris Agreement.

## IMPLICATIONS

---

HealthCareCAN contends that green healthcare is a major missing piece in Canada's efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Yet, Canada's aging and over-capacity hospitals remain broadly ineligible for federal infrastructure dollars, including funding specifically engineered to curb Canada's carbon emissions. Still more, although considered "critical infrastructure" – that which is essential to the health, safety, security and economic well-being of Canadians, hospitals are also ineligible to compete for relevant critical infrastructure funds, including under Canada's Disaster and Mitigation and Adaptation Fund.

Hence, in support of the 2020 federal pre-budget theme, *Climate Emergency: The Required Transition to a Low Carbon Economy*, HealthCareCAN offered three recommendations that address carbon reduction, climate change mitigation and adaptation, economic growth, and the health of Canadians.

### HOSPITALS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

---

Ensure a level playing field by allowing hospitals and health organizations to be eligible to compete directly for federal funding programs, such as green infrastructure and innovation.

### SUPPORTING THE FULL COST OF RESEARCH

---

Grow investments in science to cover the full cost of research and enable Canada's research hospitals and health organizations to generate **new** insights, including the health impacts of climate change.

### CAPITALIZING ON DIGITAL HEALTH & DATA PLATFORMS

---

Invest in digital health and data platforms in Canada's research hospitals and health organizations to improve patient care and support climate mitigation efforts.

HealthCareCAN is proud to be a signatory, along with 22 other national health organizations<sup>4</sup> of a [Call to Action on Climate Change and Health](#). The Call to Action urges federal political parties to "Work together to create effective and evidence-based climate action plan that ensures that Canada does its fair share to keep global warming below 1.5°C to avoid catastrophic levels of climate change." With this in mind, Canada's policymakers cannot continue to overlook the contribution that hospitals and health organizations can play to meet our commitments under the Paris Agreement.

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

---

Climate change is a top priority of the federal minority government and will be the focus of the upcoming federal budget. HealthCareCAN remains attentive to the federal government's support of 'greening' healthcare. If your organization has any questions, concerns, or feedback in connection with HealthCareCAN's advocacy in this area, we encourage you to contact us so we can ensure your voice is heard.

Emily Follwell  
Policy and Research Analyst  
[efollwell@healthcarecan.ca](mailto:efollwell@healthcarecan.ca)

Jonathan Mitchell  
Vice President – Research and Policy  
[jmitchell@healthcarecan.ca](mailto:jmitchell@healthcarecan.ca)

---

<sup>4</sup> Including the Canadian Medical Association, Canadian Nurses Association, Canadian Public Health Association, and Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment