

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

How to Deliver the Most Important Public Health Treaty of the Century

To the Editor:

According to the recently published 2015 Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change, the effects of global warming are set to undermine much of the global public health gains from the past century.¹ But the message of the Lancet Commission is also hopeful, highlighting the leadership role that health professionals can play in addressing the crisis. Its central finding is that “tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century.” How can this opportunity for public health be realized? Could negotiators gathering in Paris at the climate talks in December become ambassadors for a better and healthier future? We argue that they can—indeed, the Paris climate talks offer an extraordinary opportunity that should not be squandered. The negotiators have the potential to deliver the most important public health treaty of the century.

STRONG CLIMATE ACTION CAN IMPROVE HEALTH

Climate change is already an immediate threat to health. For example, the increased frequency of extreme weather events, such as heat waves and flooding, is resulting in increased mortality and morbidity. The European heat waves in 2003 alone were responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands of people.² Another area of concern is the potential for worsening air pollution. Often described as the “invisible killer,” air pollution takes the lives of some 7 million people globally each year.³ According to Margaret Chan, director-general of the World Health Organization, its health consequences “make air pollution one of the most important risk factors for health globally—comparable to tobacco smoking—and the largest killer in some countries.”⁴

Particularly worrisome is that the effects of air pollution fall most heavily on children, especially those living in poorer parts of cities. The European Aphekom research project showed 1 in 7 cases of asthma in children might be attributable to them

living near busy roads.⁵ But respiratory problems are not the only concern. Other recent findings show that children born to mothers exposed to high levels of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) in air pollution during pregnancy are 5 times more likely to show symptoms that characterize attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder compared with mothers without high PAH-exposure levels.⁶

The drivers of both of these culprits—worsening air pollution and climate change—are our addiction to fossil fuels, particularly coal. Coal power generation is responsible for 20% of total greenhouse gas emissions in Europe, and it is most carbon-intensive energy source.⁷ The leadership of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change warns that we need to divest from coal if we are to keep the world below the tipping point of a 2° C temperature rise.^{8,9} But we also need to reduce the use of fossil fuels to significantly reverse the damage from air pollution and smog in urban areas, where the majority of people live. The effect of climate change will only exacerbate the health problems associated with air pollution. Climate action could literally provide a breath of fresh air.

STRONG CLIMATE ACTION CAN SAVE MONEY

Urgent action is necessary—and will benefit not only our health, but our economies as well. We have evidence demonstrating that strong climate action will save money. Our nonprofit organization Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)* produced a report, “Acting NOW for Better Health: A 30% Reduction Target for EU Climate Policy” in 2010, which showed the magnitude of the health benefits that Europeans could expect from stronger climate action by the European Union (EU).¹⁰ The financial savings are itemized by country and are predicated on the respiratory and heart problems that could be avoided by a larger EU target on emission reductions. The health benefits accrue as the result of cleaner air when climate policy puts pressure on energy and other industries to reduce emissions. The cost savings for the EU as a whole were estimated at up to US\$34.2 billion per year in 2020.

Reliance on fossil fuels is part of the problem—and there is no time to waste in reducing

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*HEAL is a member of 2 leading networks that support such efforts, the Global Climate and Health Alliance and the Healthy Energy Initiative.

dependence on them. The unpaid health bill due to fossil fuels is a drain on economies. To explore a specific instance of how best to reduce emissions and promote health, HEAL investigated coal burning in electricity generation. HEAL's report, "The Unpaid Health Bill: How Coal Power Plants Make Us Sick" shows that in the EU, emissions from coal power plants are responsible for more than 18,200 premature deaths, 8,500 new cases of bronchitis, and 4 million lost working days.⁷ The associated costs, which fall on individuals, families, health services, and governments, are estimated at up to US\$48.18 billion per year.

ENDING FOSSIL FUEL SUBSIDIES CAN UNDERWRITE PUBLIC HEALTH AND RENEWABLE ENERGY

Governments are currently covering health and other costs created by burning fossil fuels, when this public spending could underwrite health prevention and health resilience.

A recent report by 4 International Monetary Fund researchers showed that fossil fuel companies are benefiting from global subsidies of US\$5.3 trillion per year.¹¹ This vast sum is partly due to direct subsidies but largely due to polluters not paying the costs imposed on governments by the burning of coal, oil, and gas. These include harm caused by air pollution to local populations as well as to people across the globe affected by the floods, droughts, and storms that are driven by climate change. This sum is greater than worldwide government spending on public health. The report also states that if governments stopped subsidizing fossil fuels, about 1.6 million premature deaths would be prevented annually due to cleaner air.¹²

Reducing subsidies may provide a boost for cleaner, renewable energy, which would also benefit global health. Although the G7 leaders recently committed to phasing out fossil fuels before the end of the century, this is too late according to Lord Nicholas Stern, author of a major 2006 report on climate change. He is now a lead author of the Global Apollo Programme,¹³ which makes the case for powering the world's energy from renewables by 2025. It shows that, even given the high level of energy investment required, it should be possible within 10 years to meet the demand for electricity with reliable wind and/or solar power that is cheaper—in every country—than power based on coal. In the United Kingdom, for example, leading physicians and public health experts are

calling on the government to phase out coal generation by 2025 to save lives and to reduce national health care expenditures.

PRESCRIPTION FOR A HEALTHY FUTURE

To deliver on the promise that the Paris talks could produce one of the most important public health treaties of the century, we present 5 recommendations for the climate negotiators:

1. **Achieve an enforceable international agreement:** A global "medical catastrophe" can be avoided by strong climate action—correct measures will significantly enhance public health. Negotiators should give full support to an ambitious and enforceable Paris agreement to drastically reduce carbon emissions with strong national reduction commitments over the next 5 years.
2. **Deliver on climate finance promises and extend these commitments:** Developed countries should negotiate an equitable agreement to deliver at least the promised US\$100 billion per year for climate mitigation and adaptation by 2020 for poorer countries and vulnerable groups to promote equity and redress economic imbalances. Negotiators should support financing for integrating climate objectives into other policy-relevant areas and call for health to be added to the list of sectors.¹⁴
3. **Invest in renewables by divesting from fossil fuels:** Governments need to agree on a global plan for a 100% phase-out of fossil fuels and a 100% phase-in of renewables by 2050 at the latest. This includes setting a moratorium on new coal-fired power plants and developing time-limited plans for a rapid global phase out of coal-fired power generation, as well as ceasing public subsidies of fossil fuels and investing in renewables. Before negotiators leave for Paris, they should urge their countries to stop public subsidies of fossil fuels and start a rapid transition to renewable energy and energy savings, if they haven't done so already.
4. **Actively monitor progress:** Health effects of mitigation and adaptation measures should be tracked and considered in future Conference of the Parties meetings as indicators for regional and national progress, together with successes in the phasing out of coal-fired power generation and the cessation of fossil fuel subsidies, as well as progress in urban planning, liveable cities, and creation of low-carbon, resilient buildings. An independent, international panel should be created to monitor the countdown to 2030, as the Lancet Commission report recommends.
5. **Engage the authoritative voice of health experts:** Health experts can help strengthen negotiators' cases with the 10-point set of recommendations for

governments over the next 5 years as outlined in the 2015 Lancet Commission's report. They should seek advice from their health ministers and listen to the consolidating voices of engaged doctors, nurses, public health, and health advocacy experts. As the Lancet Commission's report states: "A public health perspective has the potential to unite all actors

behind a common cause—the health and wellbeing of our families, communities, and countries."¹

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The Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda—Are We Doing Mental Health Justice?

To the Editor:

This year marks the target date for the Millennium Development Goals, which have led to worldwide

improvements in health and well-being in just over 25 years. Global leaders are now finalizing a new set of objectives for global development: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Recent events in Nepal remind us of the ever-looming threat of natural disasters and their devastating effects on health. Over the past few years, academics have realized that climate change does