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CLIMATE CHANGE

Politicians must heed health effects of climate change

The report on climate change and health commissioned by University College London and the Lancet concludes: “Climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century.”1 In this report, the authors emphasise not only the immediacy and gravity of this threat but also the directness: while the poorest in the world will be the first affected, none will be spared. The escalating carbon footprint of the developed world has led to the present situation, but the rapid impact on developing countries such as the encroaching deserts in Africa is the immediate price.

This is one reason why doctors must take a lead in speaking out. Another is that there are important co-benefits of tackling climate change for those with long term conditions in the developed world, such as those that come from more exercise with less use of cars and dietary change with reduced meat consumption. In December this year, world governments meet in Copenhagen, Denmark, to negotiate a new UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. There is a real danger that politicians will be indecisive, especially in such turbulent economic times as these. Should their response be weak, the results for international health could be catastrophic. Doctors are still seen as respected and independent, largely trusted by their patients and the societies in which they practise. As leaders of physicians across many countries, we call on doctors to demand that their politicians listen to the clear facts that have been identified in relation to climate change and act now to implement strategies that will benefit the health of communities worldwide.

This letter is published simultaneously in the Lancet.

Victor Lim

VICTOR LIM

Editor, Academy of Medicine Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Joseph W Stubbbs

JOSEPH W STUBBS

President, American College of Physicians, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Nazmun Nahar

NAZMUN NAHAR

President, Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Noolami Amarasena

NOOLAMI AMARASENA

President, Ceylon College of Physicians, Colombo, Sri Lanka

Zafar Ullah Chaudry

ZAFAR ULLAH CHAUDRY

President, College of Physicians and Surgeons of Pakistan, Karachi, Pakistan

Steven Chow Kim Weng

STEVEN CHOW KIM WENG

President, College of Physicians of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Bongani Mayosi

BONGANI MAYOSI

President, College of Physicians of South Africa, Rondebosch, South Africa

Zephne van der Spuy

ZEPHNE VAN DER Spuy

President, Colleges of Medicine of South Africa, Rondebosch, South Africa

Raymond Liang

RAYMOND LIANG

President, Hong Kong Academy of Medicine, Hong Kong SAR, China

Kar Neng Lai

KAR NENG LAI

President, Hong Kong College of Physicians, Hong Kong SAR, China

Geoffrey Metz

GEOFFREY METZ

President, Royal Australasian College of Physicians, Sydney, NSW, Australia

G William N Fitzgerald

G WILLIAM N FITZGERALD

President, Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada, Ottawa, ON, Canada

Brian Williams

BRIAN WILLIAMS

President, Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow, Glasgow

Neil Douglas

NEIL DOUGLAS

President, Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, Edinburgh

John Donohoe

JOHN DONOHOE

President, Royal College of Physicians of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland

Somwang Damchaivijir

SOMWANG Damchaivijir

President, Royal College of Physicians of Thailand, Bangkok, Thailand

Patrick Coker

PATRICK COKER

President, West African College of Physicians, Lagos, Nigeria

Ian Gilmore

IAN GILMORE

President, Royal College of Physicians of London, London NW1 4LE. Ian.Gilmore@rcplondon.ac.uk

Competing interests: None declared.

1 Mayor S. Climate change will have greatest health impact on poor, report warns. BMJ 2009;338:b2024. (19 May.)

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NHS organisations, let’s all sign up to the 10:10 campaign

We have joined the 10:10 campaign to cut our carbon dioxide emissions by at least 10% during 2010.1 The business reasons for joining are compelling: severe health impact if we are to deliver high quality care in the medium and long term

• Commitment to 10:10 is a positive investment in all our futures, benefitting staff morale, recruitment, and retention and increasing patients’ engagement with their health service

• Legislation and regulation such as the UK government’s carbon reduction commitment will increasingly penalise organisations that do not take bold steps to cut their emissions and become more environmentally sustainable

• Cutting energy costs is one way to increase the NHS’s productivity and efficiency.

The social reasons are equally compelling: with its responsibility to care for the health of the population, the NHS should reduce its contribution to climate change, “the biggest global health threat of the 21st century”2

• If we are serious about tackling health inequalities we should be taking bolder action on climate change, which already hits the poorest hardest

• As the largest organisation in the UK, the largest employer in Europe, and one of the largest employers in the world, the NHS must demonstrate leadership at this critical time. If we can deliver a 10% cut in our emissions in 2010 so can other organisations worldwide.

The 10:10 campaign takes positive, exemplary, and inspiring action on climate change (www.1010uk.org, health@1010uk.org).

Early commitment to 10:10 can influence the climate change talks in Copenhagen in December of this year and make urgent cuts in global emissions a reality. We urge you to join and be part of the solution, so that we can all reap the rewards of a low carbon health service.

Deborah Evans

deborah.evans@nhs.net

Chief Executive, NHS Bristol

Ian Carruthers

ian.carruthers@nhs.net

Chief Executive, NHS South West

Janet King

janet.king@nhs.net

Director, Human Resources and Facilities, Frimley Park Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

Mary Edwards

mary.edwards@nhs.net

Chief Executive, Basingstoke and North Hampshire NHS Foundation Trust

Neal Deans

neal.deans@nhs.net

Director, Estates and Facilities, St George’s Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

Patrick Geoghegan

patrick.geoghegan@nhs.net

Chief Executive, South Essex Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust

Peter Homa

peter.homa@nhs.net

Chief Executive, North Essex Partnership University Hospitals NHS Trust

Robert Naylor

robert.naylor@nhs.net

Chief Executive, University College London Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust

Tim Ballard

tim.ballard@nhs.net

Senior Partner, The Old School Surgery, Great Bedwyn, Wiltshire

Tim Riley

tim.riley@nhs.net

Chief Executive Officer, NHS Tameside and Glossop
group

Stella Dutton

stella.dutton@nhs.net

Chief Executive Officer, BMJ Group

sdutton@bmjgroup.com

Competing interests: 10:10 Health is coordinated by the Campaign for Greener Healthcare.

1 In brief. BMJ 2009;338:b1214. (25 March.)

2 Mayor S. Climate change will have greatest health impact on poor, report warns. BMJ 2009;338:b2024. (19 May.)

Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b3693

See also EDITORIAL, p 645, FEATURE, p 660, and PERSONAL VIEW, p 697

ASSISTED DYING DEBATE

A baroness replies

Delamothe is right about one thing: we should not equate disability with terminal illness.1 Not all disabled people are terminally ill, though many terminally ill people are disabled by their illness. The vulnerability of disabled people to collateral harm from the legalisation of assisted dying depends on the impact of their illness, their degree of dependence on others, and the
beliefs of some that their lives are less worth living. Many disabled people are more vulnerable than most, as Delamothe seems to recognise, albeit somewhat grudgingly.

The strident campaign to legalise assisted suicide for the terminally ill is being built around someone who is disabled and chronically rather than terminally ill. Many disabled people are like this. Therefore it is not surprising that they are concerned about the underlying message: if you have a disabling and degenerative illness the way should be cleared for you to have assisted suicide.

One hopes that the supporters of an assisted dying law would see it as providing a narrowly defined facility to be exercised under wholly exceptional circumstances. Simply limiting it to “terminally ill adults of sound mind” who want to die” is not nearly sufficient to meet this requirement.

I argued in the Lancet article that Delamothe cites that if assisted dying is being justified on grounds of personal choice and control rather than unrelievable suffering, it has effectively lost its link with terminal illness and is therefore more open to drift to encompass people who are not terminally ill. Delamothe underestimates the pressures that a change in the law would place on disabled people.

Ilora G Finlay professor of palliative medicine, Cardiff University and Velindre NHS Trust, Cardiff CF14 2TL finlay@parliament.uk
Competing interests: IGF wrote one of the papers commented on.
Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b3762

Doctors’ attitudes surveyed

Delamothe argues that it is “time for a carefully worded secret ballot” of UK doctors, having reported that 79% of the general public in a Harris poll believe in a “right to die” for the terminally ill.1

The need to clarify medical views on this subject was the motivation for my recently published survey of a large representative sample of UK doctors.2 I used the same questions as those used in surveys of the general public in British social attitudes surveys, which, like the Harris poll, have shown substantial public support for the legalisation of assisted dying.

The survey showed that the majority of UK doctors are opposed to the legalisation of euthanasia or physician assisted dying, whether in cases of terminal illness or not. There are some variations between different groups of doctors, the most significant being whether a doctor is religious. Doctors specialising in palliative medicine are the most opposed, with doctors specialising in care of the elderly being the next most opposed.

These findings are consistent with studies comparing medical and public opinion in several other countries. Clive Seale, professor of medical sociology, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 2AT c.seale@qmul.ac.uk
Competing interests: None declared.
Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b3761

Life is a terminal condition

Lord Carlile’s views are well known,2,3 but many can envisage differing thresholds and circumstances that are worse than death and not restricted to terminal illness. Since life itself is a terminal condition, there is a refreshing sense of realism in the possibility under Swiss law of assisted suicide in cases of unbearable suffering that is not the result of a terminal illness.

The attack on the World Trade Centre evidently led to some people committing suicide by leaping from the windows rather than suffer prolonged injury and death from the fire. Following these terrible circumstances, some people with religious convictions found comfort in knowing that the death of a relative had arisen from the unfolding alternatives rather than a deliberate act of suicide.1 In the current and different context should one be constrained to the alternatives for the religious reasons of others, or by the concerns of those who would not commit suicide given similar disabilities whether terminal or not?

Traditionally a doctor’s prime responsibility has been towards an individual patient, while not entirely neglecting wider considerations. Surely this should have resonance in how society responds, particularly when that patient, having reached a personal threshold, is seeking control over what remains of life and the departure from life.

The risk of exploitation is given prominence by those opposed to changes in the law, but these views seem to be detached from the everyday clinical reality of cases that are likely to occur.

If approached carefully and with consultation with other professionals and relatives these cases could be dealt with sensitively and appropriately—and more safely.

Malcolm Bowker retired consultant psychiatrist, Cheshire
Malcolm.bowker@aad.com
Competing interests: MB is a subscriber to Dignity in Dying.
1 Carlile A. The law as it stands on assisted suicide could not be clearer. BMJ 2009;339:b3169. (5 August.)
3 Channel 4. The falling man. 16 March 2006.
Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b3682

Doctors, steer entirely clear

Cumberlege urges doctors to steer clear of assisted suicide and preserve their place in society as a profession with a clear purpose: to treat, cure, and care for sick and disabled people (to which I would add “and improve the health of the population”).1

If this is the right position for the medical profession, surely it also follows that since this position is based on professional self interest, society and the media should pay no attention whatsoever to our views on assisted suicide.

The medical profession would do well not just to steer clear of assisted suicide but to make it clear that it is not for us to influence the opinion of society at large. If assisted suicide were ever to become legal then the position of the medical profession should be to have nothing to do with it. Yet that does not mean that society cannot press ahead and find another professional group to help with implementation.

Let us not just steer clear. Let’s steer entirely clear, routinely stating that this subject is very clearly outside our remit.

Christopher Spencer Jones director of public health, NHS South Birmingham, Birmingham B13 8JL christopher.spencer-jones@slsby.com
Competing interests: None declared.
1 Cumberlege J. Doctors, steer clear. BMJ 2009;339:b3422. (5 September.)
Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b3760

END OF LIFE DECISIONS

Authors respond to editorial

In the editorial accompanying our study, Byock says that we focus on practices that rarely occur at the end of life, such as euthanasia and physician assisted suicide, and pay little attention to more common decisions.1,2 However, detailed empirical reporting is necessary because of the intense societal, legal, and ethical debates about these decisions. Additionally, although some decisions such as life ending drug use without explicit patient request and palliative sedation are not common in palliative care overall, they are more common than outside palliative care.
The classification system we used has been validated and used extensively in international research. It distinguishes specifically between distinct actions and intentions, as described in detail in the methods section. “Principles do not depend on empirical data,” but our study provides empirical data on a subject that has been dominated by emotional unproved arguments. Although many people believe that euthanasia requests follow a lack of access to palliative care and that delivery of palliative care will resolve any euthanasia request, our data showed that euthanasia or physician assisted suicide was not disproportionately chosen by patients not accessing palliative care. This is an important message for policy makers and palliative care associations and should be taken into account when discussing the future role of palliative care.

Lieve Van den Block, professor of communication and education in general practice
ldvblock@vub.ac.be
Regional Deschepper, anthropologist
Johan Bilsen, professor of public health, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, End-of-Life Care Research Group, Laarbeeklaan 103, 1090 Brussels, Belgium
Nathalie Bossuyt, researcher
Viviane Van Casteren, senior researcher, Scientific Institute of Public Health, Department of Epidemiology, 1040 Brussels
Luc Deliens, professor of public health and palliative care, Vrije Universiteit Brussel, End-of-Life Care Research Group, Laarbeeklaan 103, 1090 Brussels, Belgium
Competing interests: None declared.

Counting end of life decisions
In the editorial accompanying the report from Van den Block and colleagues, Byock points out that only 22 cases of euthanasia or physician assisted suicide occurred (1.3% of all 1690 non-sudden deaths). But if the 26 cases of “life ending without a patient request” are included (unfortunately translated as “involuntary euthanasia” in early Dutch reports of studies using this questionnaire) the proportion of cases of assisted dying rises to 2.8%. All of these end of life decisions entail doctors saying yes when asked, “Was death caused by the use of a drug prescribed, supplied, or administered by you or a colleague with the explicit intention of hastening the end of life (or of enabling the patient to end his or her own life)?”

In the United Kingdom, use of the same questions with a nationally representative sample of doctors reporting on 2869 deaths (including sudden deaths) has produced figures of 0.21% for euthanasia, 0.00% for physician assisted suicide, and 0.30% for life ending without a patient request. An earlier survey using these questions, of 629 deaths in the UK in 2004, produced figures (excluding sudden deaths) of 0.17%, 0.00%, and 0.36%. Van den Block and colleagues also report the proportions of deaths in which actions were taken that entailed either an expectation or a partial intention that these would contribute to a hastened death. The wordings of the questions that produce these statistics are controversial, and worded questions have produced lower estimates.

Clive Seale, professor of medical sociology, Barts and the London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary University of London, London E1 2AD c.seale@qmul.ac.uk
Competing interests: None declared.

4 Regionale toetsingscommissies euthanasie, Jaarverslag 2008. [Annual report 2008 of the euthanasia review committees.]

Doctors can be trusted
Van den Block and colleagues’ survey in Belgium found that high use of palliative care is associated with more medical decisions to hasten death. This may be because the quality of palliative care is insufficient or because palliative care is limited in addressing suffering at the end of life.

Byock states that proponents of legalising euthanasia and physician assisted suicide and right to life advocates share “a deep distrust of doctors and the institutions in which they practice.” This claim cannot be universally upheld. The system that legally allows physician assistance in dying in the Netherlands is rightly based on trust in doctors, as proved by the regular monitoring of their actions.

Agnes van der Heide, associate professor, Department of Public Health, Erasmus MC, PO Box 2040, 3000 CA Rotterdam, Netherlands a.vanderheide@erasmusmc.nl
Judith A C Rietjens, postdoctoral researcher, Department of Public Health, Erasmus MC, PO Box 2040, 3000 CA Rotterdam, Netherlands

Competing interests: None declared.

1 BMJ 2009;339:b2844. (21 August.)

OSTEOARTHRITIS OF THE KNEE
Precise diagnosis and treatment
The more knees wear out the more they hurt—this is the message from a clinical epidemiology group in Boston. But that is not the whole story. The radiographic paper published by the same group last year shows that this progressive wear remains confined to the single compartment initially affected.

By calling the condition osteoarthritis of the knee, the authors continue a sophistry that suggests that the knee is an organ like the pancreas, where inflammation is the key process, and total excision the final solution. However, treating unicompartmental wear by unicompartmental knee replacement effectively restores function and prevents disease progression over decades. Partial replacement, whether of the medial or lateral tibiofemoral joint or of the patellofemoral joint, is not only more functional but also much more cost effective than total knee replacement driven by a diagnosis of osteoarthritic of the knee. It could save the NHS over £50m a year.

Justin Cobb, professor of orthopaedics, Imperial College, Charing Cross Hospital, London W6 8RF j.cobb@imperial.ac.uk

None declared.

HERPES ZOSTER OPHTHALMICUS

Don’t forget HIV

Lam and colleagues did not mention possible HIV infection in their 10-minute consultation on herpes zoster ophthalmicus.1 Herpes zoster may occur at any stage of HIV infection and be its first clinical presentation. In one study it was significantly higher among HIV positive men than HIV negative men (29.4 v 2.0 per 1000 person years),2 and the risk of developing herpes zoster was not associated with duration of HIV infection or rapid progression to AIDS.

HIV infection should always be considered in patients under 65 with herpes zoster. Awareness of herpes zoster in HIV may help to reduce the incidence of people presenting late with HIV infection (M Sethupathi et al, BASHH-ASTDA conference, New York, May 2008).

Kathir Yoganathan consultant physician, Singleton Hospital, ABN University NHS Trust, Swansea SA2 8QA, kathir.yoganathan@swanseas-tr.wales.nhs.uk

Competing interests: None declared.


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A/H1N1 FLU PANDEMIC

Roche responds

The use of oseltamivir (Tamiflu) in children and the development of resistance from widespread usage have been much debated.1 Antiviral treatments are currently the only available therapeutic option to prevent and treat infection with the A/H1N1 flu virus. The product summary for oseltamivir shows that it is effective and well tolerated in children.

The European Medicines Agency approves oseltamivir to treat and prevent flu in those aged 1 year and over on the basis of a positive benefit and risk assessment. The product summary for oseltamivir shows that it is effective and well tolerated in children.

The automatic assumption that children with limited English.

Two general practitioner academics who spent their professional lives researching the patient experience are facing terminal illness.2,3 Sweeney’s comment that “the more junior ranks of ancillary health professionals are simply unable to conceal the pleasure of the deployment of their authority” deserves to be systematically researched.

Managing serious illness requires collaboration between multiple professionals and, importantly, non-professionals.3 Seemingly small things—an ill-chosen phrase, lack of eye contact, a gaping hospital gown, and miscommunication about the diagnosis—came together to erode Sweeney’s sense of dignity and his trust in the wider system of care.1

We should revisit the work of Garfinkel to develop a research agenda into the small things that matter.4 Much research on organisational work focuses on standard operating procedures. Garfinkel, in contrast, argued that work is irreducibly situated and contingent; medical work is characterised by a high degree of exceptionality; and the key research question is how, from moment to moment, staff attend to subtle cues from the patient, other staff, and the medical record, and adapt their actions and utterances accordingly.

My team showed that low status general practitioners in hospitals who had been most junior members of the organisation. The agenda raised by our dying colleagues demands more theory driven research studies into how frontline administrative and ancillary work supports, or undermines, the high ideals of patient centred medicine.

Trisha Greenhalgh professor of primary health care, University College London p.greenhalgh@ucl.ac.uk

Competing interests: None declared.


Cite this as: BMJ 2009;339:b3749

MESOTHELIOMA PATIENT JOURNEY

Researching the small things that matter

Two general practitioner academics who spent their professional lives researching the patient experience are facing terminal illness.2,3 Sweeney’s comment that “the more junior ranks of ancillary health