



Climate change and global public health: 2022 Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Symposium



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Executive summary

Climate change, driven primarily by greenhouse gas emissions, will have far-reaching implications for life on Earth. Through a wide range of direct and indirect pathways it is already clear that climate change is having a profound impact on human health. Many of the worst impacts of these changes are being experienced by the most marginalised and disadvantaged communities. Climate change is therefore exacerbating existing health inequalities.

In July 2022, the UK Academy of Medical Sciences and US National Academy of Medicine co-hosted the 2022 Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Symposium, which focused on climate change and global public health. The symposium was a hybrid event at the National Academy of Medicine in Washington, with a limited number of people travelling internationally and many more joining remotely. The Symposium took stock of the current situation, future prospects, scope for decarbonisation of health sectors in the two countries, and the connections between climate change, health and other key sectors, such as agriculture, transportation and energy generation. The two Academies also discussed ways in which they might work together to address this existential threat to human existence.

Among the key issues highlighted were:

Placing health at the heart of the climate change narrative: Health impacts have not received due attention in climate debates. Highlighting the health consequences of rising temperatures and environmental disruption, as well as the health and wellbeing benefits associated with decarbonisation, provides a compelling drive to accelerate action.

Adaptation and mitigation need to be considered together: Mitigation (actions to limit global temperature rises and therefore avert health impacts) and adaptation (changes to manage the impacts associated with higher temperatures, including the impact on health) are typically considered separately. There is a need to adopt a more integrated approach, in particular to assess the synergies and trade-offs associated with particular actions and to avoid unintended consequences and inequitable outcomes.

Climate interventions are health interventions: Emphasising the negative consequences of climate change can lead audiences to disengage. By contrast, many interventions to mitigate climate change have the potential to deliver multiple health benefits, for example by reducing pollution or promoting healthier lifestyles. Stressing the positive is likely to be a more effective way of engaging with public audiences.

Public support is vital but climate change can be a sensitive issue: Public support for mitigation and adaptation measures is essential and encouraging progress has been made in recent years. However, climate change has become a politicised issue, particularly in the US, and presents a communication challenge. Focusing on specific issues, such as drought, extreme heat, wildfires, agricultural yields, and the health co-benefits of addressing these issues, may allow for constructive dialogue when political convictions might be a barrier. Further work is needed to understand public attitudes and how they are influenced.

Health needs to have a stronger voice in global and national policy dialogue: To date, the health community has not had a strong voice in climate conversations, despite the substantial impact of climate change on health. The health sector needs to avoid the risk of silos and increase its engagement with sectors such as energy, transport, industry, urban planning, and agriculture and food supply, to emphasise the public health implications of courses of action and to promote a 'health in all policies' perspective.

Health researchers need to forge stronger relations across disciplines: The impacts of climate change on health are mediated through complex pathways. Understanding these impacts – and how mitigation and adaptation actions could benefit health – will require integrated cross-disciplinary efforts. For the Academies, this could involve working more closely with other national academies that represent other disciplines.

Health researchers should seek to exploit synergies with activities addressing social determinants of health: Significant efforts are already being made to address health inequities by focusing on the social determinants that typically underlie them. There are opportunities to build on and integrate these actions with those driven by the climate imperative to ensure that actions contribute to both goals.

The Academies identified a range of ways in which they might work more closely together to enhance the presence of the health perspective on the global stage, to advance health-informed climate communication, and to promote global innovation in support of climate goals and health.

In conclusion, the Symposium highlighted the profound threat to human health posed by climate change, but also how real actions are beginning to be taken at local, national and global levels – albeit currently too slowly for Paris Agreement targets to be met. The health research communities in the UK and the US have the potential to contribute to decarbonisation within the health sector but can also play a much wider role in stressing the health impacts of climate change – and the benefits to be gained from mitigation and adaptation efforts¹. The collaborative efforts of the two Academies could help to ensure that this influence is fully realised.

1. It is important to note the potential for economic growth through innovation commercialisation and industry for those that develop solutions to tackle climate change amongst the various mitigation and adaptation strategies discussed in the meeting.



Academy of Medical Sciences
41 Portland Place
London W1B 1QH

 @acmedsci

+44 (0)20 3141 3200
info@acmedsci.ac.uk
www.acmedsci.ac.uk

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The National Academy of Sciences
500 5th Street NW
Washington, DC 20001

 @theNAMedicine

202-334-2000
NAMedicine@nas.edu
www.nam.edu