

Position Paper Regarding Climate Change and Health

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1. Summary

The Swiss Medical Students' Association (swimsa) acknowledges that climate change is a prominent and increasing threat to global and individual health. Simultaneously, the swimsa observes a distinct deficit in the perception of this threat and the awareness of the interaction of climate and health in politics and the general population, as well as medical students. Furthermore, the swimsa notes a need for action in the responsible and sustainable usage of exhaustible, fossil resources and, therefore, follows rules and guidelines that ensure the reduction of emissions.

The swimsa sees an important correlation between the survival of our planet and human health. With this backdrop, the swimsa firmly supports the planetary health movement, the climate strike movement in Switzerland, and the 'Allianz Gesundheitsberufe fürs Klima Schweiz.' Moreover, the swimsa strives for a society that promotes equality, prevents future conflicts, and actively works towards the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) laid out by the United Nations.

The swimsa especially demands that actors in the health sector take advantage of their position to inform the public about the correlation between climate and environmental change and our own health. Specifically, the aforementioned actors are asked to elaborate on the consequences of climate change and to initiate counter-measures.

2. Introduction

In connection with the fifth report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), often labelled as the 'world climate council,' the swimsa acknowledges the direct involvement of humankind in climate change and sees a dire threat to global health therein. (1)

This position is substantiated through the special commission of the scientific journal "The Lancet" and the institute for global health at the University College of London, who describe climate change as being both the biggest threat and biggest chance of the 21st century. (2)

Health-related consequences may occur either directly (e.g. through an increased rate of extreme weather phenomena) or indirectly as a result of the impact climate change has on the economy, social structures, and ecosystems. (3)

The reduction of air pollution, dietary changes, and promotion of different options for movement and transit are crucial amongst other measures to not only reach the goals of climate politics, but also to improve the general health of the population. Until now, the narrative about climate change in politics, the media, and in public was almost exclusively focused on questions regarding ecology, economy, and technology. These perspectives now shall be expanded through the addition of the consequences and potential of the conflation with human health. (4)

3. Call to Action

The swimsa acknowledges that...

1. ... climate change is an existent and ever-increasing problem that threatens global health, which pressingly needs to be addressed through the implementation of sustainable strategies, strictly enforced measures, and expanding interprofessional dialogue.
2. ... the adherence to climate goals, especially the limitation of the global temperature increase to 1.5-2°C above the pre-industrial levels, is essential for the continued preservation of global health.
3. ... the realization of the Parisian goals is inextricably linked to sustainable development (reaching the SDGs), which is necessary for a just life worth living for all humans.
4. ... the Swiss population shows a deficit in consciousness towards the correlation between climate change and health.
5. ... the health sector substantially contributes to climate-worsening emissions, which requires it to play their part in the obligation to reduce pollution and emissions.
6. ... the Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach can benefit the health of our society and should therefore be followed and supported.

The swimsa demands...

1. ... that medical students, medical staff, hospitals, and health-related non-governmental institutions take advantage of their positions to inform the public about the relation between climate change and health.
2. ... reinforced support of global health in medical education and training and increased inclusion of climate change in the national catalogue of educational objectives PROFILES.

3. ... increased promotion of research initiatives focused on climate change and health at medical faculties and institutes.
4. ... the reduction of CO₂-emissions in Switzerland across all sectors to a net-zero until the year 2030.
5. ... the reduction of CO₂-emissions in the health sector, especially in energy use, building planning, food provision, and waste production.
6. ... that all actors in Swiss healthcare conceptualize their organizations and events sustainably and low in emissions with a sustainable corporate culture that supports equality, while also promoting this model as a guide to others.
7. ... the preparation of the healthcare system for the changing climate and the integration of action plans focused on climate.
8. ... a reinforcement of health-related preventive measures, which additionally reduce emissions.
9. ... a commitment of the Swiss government to the compliance with nationally and internationally agreed goals for climate politics and the assumption of a role in the climate vanguard.
10. ... the declaration of a national climate state of emergency by the Swiss government.
11. ... a structured and socially acceptable termination of subsidies and investments in fossil energy production, which shall be accomplished as soon as possible or until the year 2030 at the latest.
12. ... the promotion of renewable energies.
13. ... climate justice.

4. Main Text

Climate change negatively affects human health through its direct and indirect consequences (5). Even though the consequences of climate change appear less threatening in Switzerland than in countries that are already severely affected, the after effects of climate change cannot be ignored in Switzerland. For example, the heatwave that hit the country in the months of June-August in 2003 has been credited with an estimated additional mortality of 975 people. (6) Furthermore, studies show that climate change is going to change the zoonotic mechanisms of transmission, which can lead to the emergence of vector-borne infectious diseases. The Asian tiger mosquito, for example, is the main vector for Chikungunya and dengue fever. Moreover, the presence and dissemination dynamics of ticks, which are responsible for borreliosis and tick-borne encephalitis, could be altered. Additionally, pollen season could lengthen and new allergens may develop. Health is also affected indirectly through the influence of social determinants. Countries with elevated levels of wealth and income possess, in fact, the necessary resources to implement preventive measures, while

countries with lower wealth and income do not. This is invariably going to lead to an increase in migration of large parts of the population to more affluent countries. (7)

As future medical doctors, we are frequently going to see ourselves confronted with the medical consequences in our daily professional lives. As noted in the CanMeds-Model under the role of 'Health Advocate,' our duty of care not only includes the medical welfare of our individual patients, but also the well-being of society - be it local, national, or global - and thus a preventive approach to climate change plays an ever-growing role in our medical daily lives. (8,9)

In the year 2015, the Paris Climate Agreement was signed by 196 nations after prolonged deliberations and negotiations. It features the commitment to the reduction of the global temperature increase to 1.5-2°C. (10) The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations took effect in 2016, number 13 of which explicitly addresses climate action, which influences all the others more or less. (11) For the adherence to these goals, equality is a clear prerequisite. (12) In addition, the World Health Assembly (WHA) decided during their last conference in May 2018 that actions towards improved health, environment, and climate change have to be intensified. As this is not a feasible goal for neither a single country nor a specific discipline, an increased interprofessional and international cooperation is necessary. (13)

The health sector produces a substantial percentage of global CO₂ emissions (14,15). The possibilities of more sustainable planning in the health sector are plentiful. Special attention needs to be paid to the following areas: (16)

- Waste: sustainable waste management with specific focus on waste reduction, recycling, as well as the avoidance of toxic materials and disposable products.
- Energy: efficient energy usage, including the training of staff in the reduction of energy consumption in their daily lives, and the gradual progression towards the exclusive usage of renewable sources of energy.
- Building planning: inclusion of sustainable, climate resilient aspects in the planning of new buildings (17), retrofitting of preexisting buildings, development of sufficient green areas, extension of public transport systems to healthcare facilities.
- Food provision: expansion of offers of sustainable, regional products, reduction of offers of highly processed foods in healthcare facilities, adaptation of food production and delivery to the current demand, and reduction of food waste.

Professional medical staff can use its social standing to advocate for measures that benefit and promote both health and the climate. As part of healthcare, professional

medical staff can play an increasingly important role in the implementation of the aforementioned changes to reduce emissions in the health sector. (8)

The strengthening of global health in medical training and education paired with an increased inclusion of issues pertaining to environmental medicine, especially of the correlation of climate change and health, is much needed. Through the anchoring of the relations of climate change with health in the curriculum, awareness and preparedness to act accordingly of future medicinal professionals is increased. Additionally, the reinforced promotion of interdisciplinary research initiatives with a focus on issues of climate change and health is desirable and necessary at medical faculties and institutes. They are at the core of evidence-based prevention and adaptation strategies, which can reduce the negative consequences of climate change for the health of us all. (8)

The burning of fossil fuel is a substantial contributor to air pollution. The continued mining of fossil fuels is therefore not future-oriented. (18) Medical staff has already raised its voice against investments in industries that actively negatively impact human health in the past. The health sector and universities can lead as role models and terminate investments in institutions and organizations that mine fossil fuels, while also demanding decision-makers to follow their example and act accordingly. Money generated through the termination of said questionable investment can then be reinvested in the promotion of sustainable and renewable energies.

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5. References

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