



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

An Open Letter to the Environment Minister from the Future Physicians of Canada

January 21, 2010

To: The Hon. Jim Prentice, Minister of the Environment

Dear Minister Prentice,

As the future physicians of Canada, we are deeply concerned that climate change will severely and negatively impact the health and wellbeing of our patients and planet. To limit dangerous climate change a global agreement in accordance with what the science demands is needed at the UN climate conference this December in Copenhagen. We ask that Canada recognize its international responsibility and make a commitment to dramatic and absolute reductions of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) as well as invest in adaptation to the changes that are inevitable.

The impacts of climate change are already being felt around the world, threatening the most fundamental determinants of health: air, water, food, shelter, and freedom from disease. The worst effects will be felt by the world's poorest and severely compromise achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Malnutrition, heat-stress, diarrheal disease, extreme weather events, infectious disease, population displacement, and conflict over depleted resources are all expected to increase as a result of climate change. The exact numbers are impossible to predict, however the estimates are staggering. Without extensive adaptive measures, up to half of the world's population could face severe food shortages by 2100. As they absorb CO₂ and further acidify, many of the world's oceans, upon which millions

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currently rely on as a primary food source, may face ecological collapse⁴. Climate change has the potential to displace 200 million people by 2050, an almost twenty-fold increase in the number of refugees worldwide today. The health effects of climate change will affect most populations and put the lives and well-being of billions of people at increased risk.

Since the last report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 2007 the natural world has alarmed scientists by exceeding the projected worst-case scenarios for many indicators including global mean surface temperature, sea-level rise, global ocean temperature, Arctic sea ice extent, ocean acidification and extreme climatic events. If emission trends continue, it is expected that warming will accelerate and increase the risk of sudden or irreversible environmental change⁶. There is still time, although limited, to prevent the worst effects of climate change.

The health of Canadians will not be spared by climate change. According to Health Canada, aside from a decreasing number of cold days, climate change is expected to have a negative impact on health. Climate change will bring with it an increased risk of extreme weather, frequency and severity of heat waves, infectious disease and diminished air quality. Rural communities as well as elderly, aboriginal and marginalized people are most at risk. Already, the combined effect of heat, poor air quality, extreme weather events and changes in traditional ways of life are being felt.

Moving away from fossil fuels will have immediate and lasting benefits for the health of Canadians. The Ontario Medical Association estimates that each year 5,800 Ontarians die prematurely, 60,000 visit the emergency room and 16,000 are admitted to hospital as a result of smog. There is a strong consensus within the medical community that the near-term health benefits from reduced air pollution associated with greenhouse gas mitigation can offset a substantial fraction of mitigation cost.

In 2002, Canada agreed to reduce overall emissions of greenhouse gases by at least 5% below 1990 levels by 2012 when it ratified the Kyoto Protocol. Since then, Canada's emissions have increased 26% from 1990 to 2007—33.8% above the Kyoto target. Today, Canadians emit over 22 tonnes of CO₂ equivalents per capita – among the highest in the world. Earlier this year, the World Wildlife Fund ranked Canada as having the worst performance out of all G8 countries in terms of CO₂ emissions and climate policy.

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Canada has a chance to reverse its dismal environmental record at the UN climate conference in Copenhagen in December of 2009. Here the governments of the world must agree on how to curb dangerous climate change after the Kyoto treaty expires in 2012. What is most needed for the world to move forward with such a sweeping transition is political will.

In accordance with the 2009 recommendations of the International Scientific Conference on Climate Change, we ask the Government of Canada to:

- 1) Cooperate with the international community to reach a global agreement in Copenhagen, set mitigation targets that are in line with the best available science and create policies to make them achievable.
- 2) Invest in an adaptation safety net for the world's poorest and ensure that the plan to curb emissions is equitable for developing countries.
- 3) Protect the immediate and long-term health of Canadians by making use of existing technologies and approaches to reduce our reliance on non-renewables and adapt to climate change.

With this letter, we are joining the following list of medical associations appealing for protection from the health hazards posed by climate change:

World Health Organization
World Medical Association
Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Canada
American Academy of Pediatrics
American College of Physicians
American Medical Association
American Public Health Association
Australian Medical Association
Bangladesh College of Physicians and Surgeons
British Medical Association
College of Physicians of Malaysia
College of Physicians of South Africa
Colleges of Medicine of South Africa
Hong Kong Academy of Medicine
Hong Kong College of Physicians
Royal Australasian College of Physicians
Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow
Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

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Royal College of Physicians of Ireland
Royal College of Physicians of London
Royal College of Physicians of Thailand
West African College of Physicians
Physicians for Social Responsibility

I thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Tyler Johnston
President / Président
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cc:

The Right Honourable Stephen Harper, Prime Minister of Canada
Michael Ignatieff, Leader of the Liberal Party of Canada
Gilles Ducespe, Leader of the Bloc Québécois
Jack Layton, Leader of the New Democratic Party
Elizabeth May, Leader of the Green Party of Canada

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