

## Book Review

# Climate Change Medicine

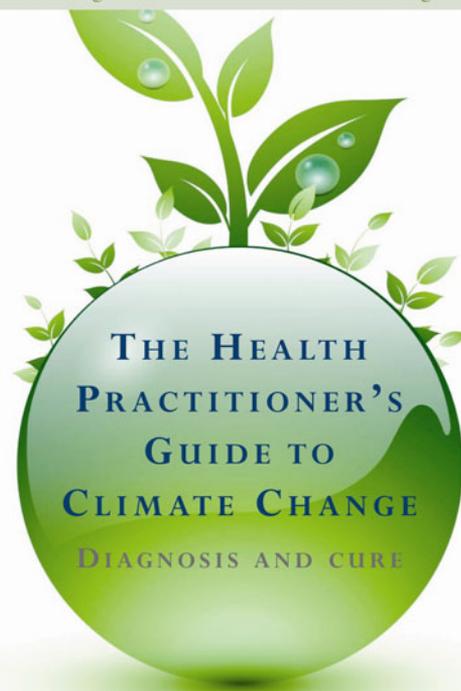
*THE HEALTH PRACTITIONER'S GUIDE TO CLIMATE CHANGE: DIAGNOSIS AND CURE*, JENNY GRIFFITHS, MALA RAO, FIONA ADSHEAD, AND ALLISON THORPE (EDITORS), 2009, LONDON: EARTHSCAN, 380 PP, ISBN: 978-1-84407-729-8

The World Health organization estimates that greater than 150,000 deaths were attributable to climate change in 2000, with these numbers likely to increase in the future. The intersection of climate change/global warming and health is a real one, but not one that has received as much press as the effects of global warming on wildlife or agriculture. There has only recently been significant discussion of the potential health concerns within the mainstream health science community in the United States. Perhaps this paucity of attention was behind the World Health Organization's decision in 2008 to declare the theme of World Health Day as "Protecting health from climate change" (World Health Organization, 2008).

In any case, *The Health Practitioner's Guide to Climate Change: Diagnosis and Cure* was published in a year when climate change took center stage in the world's arena with the much-anticipated U.N. Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The authors' goal is to offer resources to healthcare practitioners on climate change and its interaction with health, but also, more importantly, suggestions on actions they can undertake to mitigate and adapt to climate change, and to advocate for social and policy change.

The 13 authors of the book stem from various fields, including medicine, epidemiology, landscape architecture, geology, and environmental science. Their ideas were brought together with an editorial team consisting of Jenny

Foreword by Dr. R.K. Pachauri,  
Chairman, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change



Edited by  
Jenny Griffiths, Mala Rao,  
Fiona Adshead and Allison Thorpe

Griffiths, Mala Rao, Fiona Adshead, and Allison Thorpe. Many of the authors are from the UK and most are currently working in the healthcare sector, or have in the past.

The book is divided into two parts: Information and Action. Part I—Information—consists of the first four chapters of the book and really serves as background on greenhouse gases, climate change trends, health impacts, and benefits of action on climate change. The authors have assumed nothing about the reader's background knowledge

and have done well introducing concepts and definitions that may be unfamiliar to those outside the field. They explain the dynamics of climate change and articulate not just the direct effects (heat waves, floods, poor air quality, etc.), but also the indirect effects to health (increasing social inequalities secondary to rising global food prices, increasing risk and spread of vector-borne diseases, conflict, etc.). In essence, they outline why climate change is bad for health.

Recently, the public health benefits of mitigation strategies for reducing greenhouse-gas emissions were analyzed in a special series of articles published in the *Lancet* (Health and climate change, 2009) touching on issues such as low-carbon electricity generation, food production, urban land transport, and short-lived greenhouse pollutants. Some of these themes are discussed in Chapter 4, “Health Benefits of Action on Climate Change.” Examples include how reducing meat/dairy consumption or encouraging more active transport would reduce emissions, but would also have the “co-benefit” of reducing risk of cardiovascular disease. Such health strategies are already part of many doctor–patient discussions on healthy behavior change and, with the right patient, the connection to climate change could be an additional motivation.

Part II—Action—forms the remaining eight chapters, and the largest portion of the book. Chapters 5–10 cover everything from how to influence policy, plan low-carbon communities, social marketing, and community engagement. There is a discussion on how to estimate your carbon footprint, with both links for online calculators and more pen-and-paper ways of estimating one’s footprint. This section of the book is geared toward anyone, not just healthcare professionals, with an interest in taking individual responsibility and going green. The authors premise that doctors are still well respected in many societies and their actions can influence those around them. It also points out that focusing on the health benefits inspires hope, freedom, and increased quality of life: values that many would agree are important.

The introduction by Sir Andy Haines advertises this book as a kind of one-stop-shop for healthcare practitioners on what individuals and communities can do, and how to advocate for change both locally and on a national or international scale. The book does a very good job of offering a wide breadth of information on issues relating to climate change and mitigation strategies that any individual interested in advocating for change could use to engage the

larger community. Given the title of the book, I thought that the “Action” section of the book offered very general information on engaging with communities and was not particularly directed to healthcare practitioners. However, these matters would be very relevant for the healthcare practitioner who wants to go beyond the health effects discussions related to climate change and into general advocacy activities.

The last two chapters of the book focus on interventions housed within the healthcare infrastructure. Chapter 11, “How Health Services Can Act,” discusses institutional policies such as building design, heating and cooling, and procurement policies aimed at reducing the carbon footprints of healthcare practices. Chapter 12, “How to Prepare for the Health Effects of Climate Change,” acts as a charge to the readers for what steps to take towards adaptation, including public health planning, including preparation for extreme weather events and the role of health agencies.

While the book’s 380 pages may initially seem daunting, it is in fact an easy read. Most of the technical jargon is well defined, and the chapters are well organized. Most of the examples offered are from the UK, but can be generalized to other areas of the world with similar infrastructure. This volume provides the reader the vocabulary, concepts, examples, and tools to engage more effectively in climate change debates. While it is perhaps not an academic medicine or science policy masterpiece, it lives up to its basic intent: to educate healthcare providers and illustrate where this community fits into the broader panorama of climate change, and how individuals can address this global problem.

Yvonne Njage

Fogarty International Center,  
National Institutes of Health, Bethesda, MD 20892  
e-mail: yvonne.njage@nih.gov

## REFERENCES

- Health and climate change. Special series (2009) *Lancet* 374(9707):2035–2114
- World Health Organization (2008) Protecting health from climate change. Available: <http://www.who.int/world-health-day/previous/2008/en/index.html> (accessed January 25, 2010)

Published online: May 19, 2010