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ISSUES RELATED TO POTENTIAL HEALTH IMPACTS RESULTING FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

The Views Of The Global Climate Coalition

Attempting to link global climate change and adverse health impacts requires a long and very tenuous stretch. Attention to this labored hypothesis detracts from a much needed focus on solid, identifiable ways to improve public health around the globe.

Concerns that climate change might be the cause of various health problems rests on a number of unproved assumptions. Most of the existing literature concerning the potential health impacts of climate change is based on computer-generated projections of possible increases in global average temperatures into the next century. Climate related health impact projections reported in 1995 by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), a panel of international climate and economic experts assembled by the United Nations, are based on the 1992 IPCC climate projections.

However, since 1992, improvements in climate models have resulted in significant reductions in the projected rate and magnitude of future climate change. For example, the IPCC in 1995 has stated that their "best estimate" is that global mean surface air temperature will increase about 2 degrees C by the year 2100. This estimate is approximately one third lower than the "best estimate" in 1992. As a result, health impact projections should be reassessed using the 1995 climate projections. The Global Climate Coalition believes that such a reassessment will produce significantly lower health impact projections than currently reported by the IPCC and in general media accounts on the topic.

In addition, when reviewing health impact projections based on regional forecasts from climate models, policy makers should consider that confidence in such projections can be no greater than the confidence which exists in the regional climate forecasts. According to the IPCC, confidence in regional climate forecasts "remains low". Therefore, confidence in health impact projections based on these models must also be low.



As a result, any assessment of potential health impacts suggested in the literature needs to be placed in context. Suggestions have been made that man-made greenhouse gases either have or will lead to death and illnesses from increased heat waves, climate-related droughts, floods and other disasters. Global warming alarmists also claim that infectious diseases would be spread to new regions of the world, especially "vector borne diseases" such as malaria and dengue, which are transmitted by mosquitoes, rodents and other carriers.

Duane Gubler, chief of the vector-borne disease branch of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control, is skeptical that any connection exists between global warming and the spread of disease. "Dengue is an example that all the people who talk about this use...," he told the Baltimore Sun recently. "But none of this has been associated with global warming...."

Dr. Gubler believes the primary culprits for the spread of disease are poverty, poor sanitation, increased world population and a declining health infrastructure. Dr. John La Montagnac, a director at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, agrees with this view and adds that mass human migration and the growing ineffectiveness of antibiotics are also responsible for the spread of disease.

The most recent scientific assessment of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change states that:

"Improved primary health care for vulnerable populations could play a significant role in reducing a range of health impacts, including some vector-borne and other communicable diseases, and the effects of extreme events." (WGII FSM, section 18.5)

The IPCC lists a number of actions that would be far more effective and far more responsive to human suffering than directing limited resources to cutting current greenhouse gas emissions. Disease vector distribution can change for a number of environmental reasons, including natural variability in weather patterns. There are many ways to respond to those changes according to the IPCC.

"Improved sanitation and water treatment both reduce the spread of waterborne diseases and may provide a measure of safeguard against importing exotic enteric waterborne diseases such as cholera...Finally, disease surveillance could be strengthened and integrated with other environmental monitoring to design early warning systems; develop early, environmentally sound public health interventions; and develop anticipatory societal policies to reduce the risk of outbreaks and the subsequent spread of epidemics." (WGII FSM, section 12.5.6)

Since natural variations exist in the forces that control climate change, regional and global average temperature changes are likely to occur regardless of attempts to reduce man-made emissions of greenhouse gases. As a result, the most prudent and effective course of action to protect public health is to improve basic health services as outlined above.

The Global Climate Coalition believes that health professionals have a responsibility to focus on known health threats such as: the inadequacy of public health surveillance to provide early detection of diseases, the inadequacy of sanitation and water quality, inadequate nutrition and personal behavior. Nations with higher standards of living are generally healthier. Economic growth and development generate resources that enable societies to improve living standards, which include better access to health care facilities and disease prevention.

In short, climate change is a marginal factor in the broad range of public policy options that should be examined in addressing health concerns around the globe. The issue is one of priorities and proper use of scarce human and capital resources. Attention should be directed at those who suffer from inadequate nutrition, a lack of fresh water, subpar health care, deficient sanitation and similar problems. Improvements should also be made in disease warning networks and national vaccination programs, and disease prevention should be emphasized over treatment.

The Global Climate Coalition is an organization of business trade associations and private companies established in 1989 to coordinate business participation in the scientific and policy debate on global climate change.

WGI, WGII, WGIII = IPCC Working Groups One, Two and Three.

FSM = Full Supporting Material, the peer reviewed portion of IPCC's work.

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