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Op/Ed

VIRGINIANS AT RISK

Climate change is harming our health

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Springtime blooms mark the arrival of pollen season in Virginia, and for allergy sufferers the misery seems to be getting worse every year. In fact, it actually is. Doctors across the U.S. are confirming what climate scientists, who have the tools to study atmospheric and oceanic changes, have concluded — climate change is “unequivocal” and it is already affecting our health.

The real questions are now: How is climate change affecting human health? Who is most vulnerable, and what can be done to stop it? To shed light on these questions, a Virginia research center joined three major medical societies of allergists, lung specialists, primary care and other specialists to assess their experiences regarding climate and health. Nearly 2,300 physicians responded and 375 were from Southeastern states. These surveys revealed notable findings about how climate change is affecting the nation and the state of Virginia.

Allergists from Virginia remarked that their patients overall are experiencing “increased respiratory symptoms from particulate pollution during summer.”

Most startling is the fact that 3 out of 4 physicians surveyed indicated climate change is already affecting their patients’ health, and nearly 90 percent reported that climate change is relevant to direct patient care. They reported those most at risk are children, the elderly, people with chronic diseases and the poor.

Virginia is experiencing a “double-whammy” with air that is among the most polluted in the country, 40 percent of pollution coming from power plants, and its location in the heart of the ragweed pollen belt. Higher temperatures from climate change may lead to air that is unsafe to breathe. Ground-level ozone pollution, a component of smog, forms when sunlight combines with exhaust fumes, especially during heat waves. Many doctors are concerned about their patients with asthma, allergies and lung disease (COPD). As one pulmonary doctor reported, “Ozone exposure in my city worsens the symptoms of my COPD patients and my asthmatics.” This leads to increased medication use, emergency room visits, hospitalizations and even death.

Another doctor commented in our survey, “Several of my patients have remarked on earlier and longer allergy seasons leading to worse asthma control.” Over 60 million Americans suffer from either allergies or asthma. The Richmond metropolitan area is among the nation’s most challenging places

for people to live with pollen allergies. Hotter temperatures and higher carbon dioxide levels give rise to greater concentrations of pollen in the air that has greater potency and for longer periods of time throughout the year.

Despite imminent environmental health threats, most doctors believe the actions they take in their personal and professional lives can contribute to effective action on climate change. Many are looking toward environmental sustainability, including energy efficiency and clean renewable energy, such as solar, to power their workplaces and homes. Solar power has been shown to be healthier than many other types of energy production as it does not release carbon emissions or other toxic byproducts into our air and water. With clean energy jobs on the rise, Virginia has one of the nation’s fastest-growing renewable energy economies, which already employs more workers than coal.

All Virginians now have an opportunity to support state policies that further promote clean renewable energy. In June 2014, the EPA announced its draft Clean Power Plan to reduce carbon dioxide pollution from existing coal-fired power plants, the nation’s largest source of heat-trapping pollution, by 30 percent from 2005 levels before 2030. To help reach this goal, each state is required to file a state implementation plan by June 2016.

Climate experts from agencies like NASA, NOAA and DOD and experts from the CDC reached the conclusion that “the global warming of the past 50 years is primarily due to human activities, predominantly the burning of fossil fuels.” Results from our surveys showing that many doctors around the country are now witnessing harmful health effects from climate change among their patients are especially worrisome in light of recent news.

Some politicians are advising governors to sabotage national efforts to clean up our air. Obstruction of the Clean Power Plan will hasten the spread of negative health impacts and could have devastating repercussions. Allowing this to be a political battle puts all Americans’ health at risk — especially our children, elderly, sick and poor. Now is the time to act by urging your state legislators to develop robust plans to reduce air pollution and start improving the health conditions in Virginia.

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