

## A Commission on climate change

“Climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century.” This statement opens and sums up the final report of a year-long Commission held jointly between *The Lancet* and University College London (UCL) Institute for Global Health. Climate change will have its greatest impact on those who are already the poorest in the world: it will deepen inequities and the effects of global warming will shape the future of health among all peoples. Yet this message has failed to penetrate most public discussion about climate change. And health professionals have barely begun to engage with an issue that should be a major focal point for their research, preparedness planning, and advocacy (the UK’s Climate and Health Council is a notable exception).

The most serious threats facing human health today are deeply complex. They include economic crises, pandemics, poverty, and violence and conflict. These problems will demand complex solutions. But few organisations are able to bridge the widely differing domains and disciplines necessary to define ways to solve these unusually challenging human predicaments. Universities are such institutions. Strangely, they are commonly neglected sources—and forces—for social change. Even within many great universities, there has been a withering of ambition, an erosion of confidence, about their contribution to society and its ills. But since *The Lancet* began its global health series (with child survival in 2003), we have observed the remarkable wealth of knowledge and skill within truly great educational and research establishments. Universities with a strong social and moral vision have huge potential to assist policy making in health. The challenge is to harness these possibilities of influence to address neglected but serious threats to human—even planetary—survival.

UCL is a university that has combined a distinguished history of moral engagement with a more recent revitalised global purpose, expressed through its strengthened commitment to global health in teaching, research, and institution building. In preparing to undertake its work for this first *Lancet* Commission, the UCL team, led by Anthony Costello, reached out beyond health to engineers, political scientists, lawyers, geographers, anthropologists, economists, philosophers, and students, among others. They discovered new ways to review evidence and integrate ideas collaboratively.

And through these efforts, they identified five critical challenges that scientists, clinicians, and policy makers will have to address if climate change is not to become the biggest catastrophe threatening human survival.

First, there is a massive gap in information, an astonishing lack of knowledge about how we should respond to the negative health effects of climate change. Second, since the effects of climate change will hit the poor hardest, we have an immense task before us to address the inadequacies of health systems to protect people in countries most at risk. Third, there is a technology challenge. Technologies do have the potential to help us adapt to changes in climate. But these technologies have to be developed out of greater research investments into climate change science, better understanding about how to deliver those technologies in the field, and a more complete appreciation of the social and cultural dimensions into which those technologies might be implanted. A fourth challenge is political: creating the conditions for low-carbon living. And finally there is the question of how we adapt our institutions to make climate change the priority it needs to be.

The Commission calls for a new public health advocacy movement. This movement has to usher in an unprecedented era of cooperation between widely divergent, but utterly connected, spheres—disease, food, water and sanitation, shelter and settlements, extreme events, and population and migration. Health professionals are critical to this movement. Too many doctors have been silent for too long about the importance of climate change to the future of health and health services. Fortunately, in the UK, the Royal College of Physicians has given a uniquely strong professional lead. Its commitment needs to be reflected in the work of other professional bodies and associations worldwide.

*The Lancet* is planning an extensive programme of work to address other neglected areas in health that demand a complex interdisciplinary analysis and response. We see universities as indispensable partners in this effort to translate science into practice and policy. Our commitment is long term. With UCL and other partners, we plan to convene an international summit in two years’ time to review progress and priorities in our collective responses to the urgent and alarming health effects of climate change. ■ *The Lancet*



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