THE GLOBAL CLIMATE & HEALTH ALLIANCE

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Health Care Without Harm

PRESS RELEASE
Health organisations call for climate action on IPCC WG2 report's publication

Brussels, 03/04/2014 – Health and medical organisations are calling on the EU to respond to the major health risks described in the recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s Second Working Group report [1] on 'Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation', released on Monday**.**

In a briefing document summarising the IPCC report's implications for health, now and in the future, the Global Climate & Health Alliance (GCHA) and its member organisations argue that there is still time to turn what has been called "the biggest global health threat of the 21st century" into one of our *biggest opportunities* to improve health.

The Alliance's briefing report is being launched today, together with a short film, a thunderclap and set of online resources [2]. It summarises the state of the science, using evidence in the IPCC report as its primary basis, and calls for urgent action to protect health from climate change, and to promote health through low-carbon, sustainable development. Health in Europe is threatened in many ways; the report emphasises that 'wealthy countries are not immune'.

At the global level, it is expected that climate change will exacerbate poverty and act as a driver of migration, and potentially conflict, further increasing people's vulnerability to extreme weather. But the health impacts are also being felt here in Europe. Below are some examples of how climate change is already affecting human health in Europe:

- Floods have already killed one thousand Europeans and affected an additional 3.4 million during the first decade of the century, and they are increasing in both frequency and severity. Projected river and coastal flooding could affect between 1 and 5.9 million people in Europe by 2080, putting far more people at risk.
- Climate change is likely to worsen air quality in Europe. Exposure to high levels of tropospheric ozone, is projected to increase with higher temperatures and under drought conditions, which cause more wildfires and thus higher emissions of ozone precursors. Ozone is currently linked to about 20 000 premature deaths, and 14 000 hospital admissions in the EU-25.
- Climate change might potentially increase the seasonability and duration of allergic disorders like hay fever or asthma with implications for direct costs in terms of care and medicines, and lost working hours.

- Climate change has been associated with the spread of many infectious diseases into Europe, including dengue fever, chikungunya and visceral leishmaniasis. Austerity measures since 2008 have led to cutbacks in health services in some countries, followed by a resurgence of climate-sensitive diseases including malaria.
- Climate change is forecast to drive up food prices and to increase the number of undernourished children under five by 20-25 million globally, by 2050, in turn increasing stunting, anaemia and child mortality. In the European context, this will also have important impacts on nutrition, especially for low-income groups [3].

The Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL) a founding member of GCHA has been promoting the health co-benefits of climate action in the EU for many years.

Julia Huscher, HEAL's coal and health officer says, *"Human health is incredibly fragile in light of the threat that climate change poses, and especially when looking at the likely magnitude of changes. Mitigation efforts can have large health benefits – reducing the burning of fossil fuels and moving to cleaner energy sources can bring down the rates of important chronic diseases, especially cardiopulmonary diseases and diabetes. For the EU as a whole, the anticipated benefits of an ambitious set of climate and energy targets could be as high as €34.5 billion."*

It is clear that human health is profoundly threatened by our failure to tackle climate change in Europe and beyond. A recent letter to the Editor of the Times [4], from the UK's most senior health professionals, stated '*Never before have we known so much and done so little. Failing to act decisively and quickly will inevitably cause great suffering and potentially catastrophic consequences.*'

Several such statements from health professionals come shortly after the World Health Organization revised its estimate of air pollution's health impact upwards, to 7 million premature deaths annually: 1 in every 8 deaths globally [5]. Much of this air pollution is caused by fossil fuel combustion: the air pollution caused by coal power alone in Europe results in 18200 premature deaths and 28 million cases of respiratory symptoms annually [6].

Physical inactivity – which correlates with car ownership – results in a further 3.2 million premature deaths each year. This means that policies to improve air quality and increase physical activity (for example, low-carbon energy and active travel policies) represent an unprecedented opportunity to improve global public health and tackle climate change simultaneously. Many other such health 'co-benefits' exist, such as preventing cold deaths through investment in home insulation, or major reductions in diseases like heart disease and stroke achievable by increasing active travel, and reducing red and processed meat consumption.

The GCHA calls on all governments to commit to a binding and ambitious treaty at the UN climate negotiations in Paris 2015, including specific provision for the effective protection of public health. There is an urgent need to ensure that climate policy is designed so as to maximize its accompanying health benefits, as well as to ensure that the world achieves the sustained and rapid emissions reductions needed to avert dangerous climate change.

Quotes from GCHA members:

"This report really emphasises the fact that climate change is the biggest threat to public health we face, and that without urgent action to curb emissions - both by individuals and organisations - the impact on the health of many will continue to increase. The good thing is that there are co-benefits between action to reduce emissions and action to improve health - for example, walking and cycling instead of driving is both good for the planet and good for your health." – Sue Atkinson, Co-Chair, Climate and Health Council

"The health sector needs to play a central role in addressing climate change by anchoring the community response to extreme weather events, leading by examples in mitigating its own climate footprint and becoming powerful messengers for climate policies that will improve the health of our communities and the planet." - Gary Cohen, President, Health Care Without Harm

"Climate change and health are inextricably linked. As future physicians, medical students have a moral responsibility to put patients' health first. By taking action now we can improve the health of our communities, and prevent millions of needless deaths." - Josko Mise, President, International Federation of Medical Students' Associations

Notes to editors:

[1] IPCC AR5 report 'Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability': http://ipcc-wg2.gov/ar5/

[2] GCHA briefing report and online resources http://www.climateandhealthalliance.org/ipcc

[3] Oxfam – Poverty in the UK http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what-we-do/issues-we-work-on/poverty-in-the-uk

[4] Letter to the Editor of the Times: 'Global warming's threat to health' http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/opinion/letters/article4048102.ece

[5] World Health Organisation: 7 million premature deaths annually linked to air pollution (News release) http://who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/air-pollution/en/

[6] Health and Environment Alliance: 'The Unpaid Health Bill: how coal power plants make us sick' http://www.env-health.org/resources/projects/unpaid-health-bill/

You can find the resources described above at http://climateandhealthalliance.org/ipcc, and further information about climate change and health here.

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The Global Climate and Health Alliance (GCHA) is made up of health organisations from across the globe who are united by a shared vision for a sustainable future. It was formed in Durban in 2011 to tackle climate change and to protect and promote public health. The Alliance aims to ensure health impacts are integrated into global, national and local responses to climate change and to encourage the health sector's mitigation and adaptation efforts. Website: www.climateandhealthalliance.org