Creating an Environmentally Sustainable Health System Demands a Socially Accountable Approach in a Post-COVID World

COMMENTARY

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ABSTRACT

The impacts of climate change can already be seen among many of the patients in our clinics and emergency rooms, and as with all disasters, the most impoverished and marginalized members of society are the hardest hit. The health system has a social accountability role to anticipate and respond to the evolving health needs of our society. We are the stewards of this planet, steering the course through current and future challenges. What we do now will determine what the world will be like for our children and grandchildren. At times like this, more than ever before, health

workers around the world must unite and engage in contributing to shaping future policy directions and monitoring progress to create a post-COVID world where social accountability and sustainable development go hand in hand.

Introduction

This special issue – which includes a call to action for a sustainable health system by Miller and Xie (2020) – comes at a highly opportune time, encouraging change agents across Canada and beyond to assume a leadership role for "getting their own house in order." The convergence of environmental harm and social inequities highlights the urgency of ensuring that health systems also become more socially accountable. These existential threats of climate change and marginalization are inextricably linked and must be resolved synergistically as environmental sustainability and strengthened population health cannot be achieved without concerted action and broad social change.

The concept of social accountability refers to the social contract that medicine has with society (Dharamsi et al. 2011). This is a moral obligation to advocate for those who are underserved, and to provide equitably accessible healthcare that is responsive to patient, community and population health needs. Social conditions, from poverty to racism to climate change, that contribute to human disease and suffering must be acknowledged and addressed. Collaboration with stakeholders, government and policy makers is critical for creating a health system that is accountable to the society that it serves.

By promoting "net-zero" health systems and playing an active role in advocating for broader restructuring of societies, Miller and Xie (2020) argue for a more robust and explicit socially accountable approach to achieve environmental sustainability. In 2020, this approach includes taking advantage of the current window of opportunity that the COVID-19 pandemic provides to repair outmoded and inequitable systems, including the health system, as revealed by the pandemic's impact on our most disadvantaged (Montreal Public Health Department 2020; Public Health Ontario 2020). A socially accountable approach facilitates the creation of structural changes that will lay the foundation for a healthy and sustainable future – an intriguing intersectional convergence of climate change and the pandemic, a moment for true change that must be seized.

As with all world calamities, natural and human initiated, it is well known that the most impoverished and marginalized members of society are the hardest hit. It is well understood that social inequality greatly influences the experience and impact of climate change (Islam and Winkel 2017), creating a vicious cycle where those who are disadvantaged (i.e., due to poverty, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.) are disproportionately exposed to the harms caused by severe weather events and other challenges caused by climate change, and have fewer resources to recover from these damaging exposures. This, in turn, makes them even more susceptible to future adverse effects of climate change. As a result, they have a vastly diminished ability to withstand and recover from the harms experienced (Islam and Winkel 2017). Similarly, the economic and social crisis caused by COVID-19 has highlighted the deficits of our social protection systems, where 55% of the world's population has no social protection and only 29%, concentrated in rich countries, is protected in all stages of life (UNRIC Brussels 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic is therefore a syndemic that disproportionately affects those who are the least protected in

society (Poteat et al. 2020). Rebuilding the post-COVID world in a time of worsening climate change requires us to take an approach that addresses the social determinants of health first and foremost. Social accountability is thus an integral component of economic, environmental and health recovery and sustainability.

Combining Traditional Indigenous Wisdom and Scientific Knowledge to Protect Our Planet

Canada's Indigenous peoples offer a unique perspective, having lived through many environmental degradations, epidemics and other hardships over millennia. An Indigenous elder once said, "If the land is not healthy, how can we be?" First Nations, Inuit and Métis people have adapted to many changes, integrating science and traditional knowledge by using "two-eyed seeing" (Barlett et al. 2012) to promote actions that can lead to significant improvement of the environment and the well-being of every living being on earth. Indigenous elders speak about the concept of stewardship and remind us about the notion of thinking ahead seven generations (US Climate Resilience Toolkit 2018). We are the stewards of this planet, steering the course through current and future challenges. What we do now will determine what the world will be like for our children and grandchildren and even for their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We are caring for this planet for a short time and are responsible for handing it over to future generations in a better condition than when we found it, and to aid the reversal of environmental degradation caused by human use. This is the ethical imperative of intergenerational equity and justice. Leaders making decisions today need to think about the impact their decisions will have on health and equity for not only today but also tomorrow and far into the future. Front-line health workers – who already recognize the magnitude of harms being experienced because of climate change and social inequity – need to be supported to raise the alarm to influence decision makers at multiple levels to ensure that the post-COVID world will be just and sustainable.

A "Wake-Up" Call

In recent months, because of the pandemic, our global society has witnessed mass lockdowns, plunging stock markets, wide-scale government bailouts, major economic and social challenges and a global death count surpassing one million (WHO 2020). Yet, this is only a prelude and can serve as a "wake-up call" to warn us of the threat to economic development, global security and human health because of the impending climate change crisis, which could prove far more disruptive for humanity than COVID-19. The impact of the pandemic is providing an accelerated worldwide shared experiential preview of what climate change will also bring upon the earth.

A Call to Socially Accountable Action for Health Workers

Front-line health workers can do more than just pick up the pieces and put on bandages when the victims of climate change present themselves for care, ensuring that even underserved populations have access to quality treatments and a patient's medical home (The College of Family Physicians of Canada 2019). Those working in the health system can role-model proactive change in patient care, organizationally and at policy levels (Andermann 2016). First, many of the impacts of climate change can be seen in the number of patients visiting our clinics and emergency rooms and filling our hospital beds and even our morgues. Health workers witness physical and psychological trauma victims from increasingly violent and unpredictable storms, floods and fires; patients

suffering from heat stroke and heat exhaustion during summer heat waves; an increasing numbers of adults and children with asthma attacks due to extended pollen seasons; people with injuries and premature mortality due to the early breakup of the ice on bodies of water that are meant to remain frozen much longer; and people suffering from infectious diseases caused by mosquito and tick bites in regions where, until a few years ago, these diseases never existed in Canada. Canada's health system will become increasingly overwhelmed by climate-related morbidity and mortality and the disproportionate impact we see on the more disadvantaged (Islam and Winkel 2017). Health professionals are a trusted voice that can broker complex scientific information into relevant messaging for patients and the public that takes into consideration the nuances of risk perception and the psychology of effective risk communication in a crisis (CDC 2019). Most of all, the health system has a social accountability role – the professional social contract – to anticipate and respond to the health needs of our society (Buchman et al. 2016), thereby preventing death and disease and reducing health inequities.

Health workers can also take a more proactive stance within their local institutions and communities, reducing waste and creating a "net-zero" health system that does not produce greenhouse gas emissions in their regions. Health workers sensitive to environmental issues can also act as role models for their peers by advocating for and contributing to high-quality data collection of the health impacts caused by environmental degradation and ensuring that such data are disaggregated to better appreciate how these impacts unduly affected those who are more disadvantaged in society. As role models, their tasks would include the creation of robust reporting systems to measure health impacts from the ever-increasing incidences of heat waves, wildfires, extreme weather events and vector-borne diseases that Canadians are facing – measuring the human impact is an important step to promoting broader change. Health workers can also advocate for the greening of the Canadian energy systems, for instance, starting with a rapid coal phase-out, which directly affects the health of populations through air pollution. Anticipating the challenges faced by marginalized populations who risk unemployment and layoffs through such changes allows advanced planning for a just transition approach to secure livelihoods and maintain economic health when shifting to sustainable production systems in other labour markets and sectors. It would be important to proactively think ahead to which "green economy sectors" could be pursued that are sustainable and ensure high-quality work opportunities and potential for economic growth.

Finally, at times like this, more than ever before, health workers around the world must unite and engage in contributing to shaping future policy directions and monitoring progress set forth by existing mechanisms, such as the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (United Nations Climate Change 2020). There is an obligation to ensure continued action at the national level and increase the ambitious targets brought to the international level through the nationally determined contributions to the convention. This will strengthen global governance and facilitate urgent action at all levels to avert the current trajectory and lead the world to a more sustainable, inclusive and equitable future.

A Call to Socially Accountable Action by Political Leaders and Decision Makers

A proactive, trauma-informed approach is paramount to promoting widespread trust,

safety and choice (Purkey et al. 2018). COVID-19 has provided an initial taste of what it feels like for our entire world to become an uncertain and precarious place, creating a sense of anxiety and widespread fear. Decision makers need to first ensure that their actions do no harm. They need to be inclusive and avoid (even well intentioned) paternalism by ensuring that those affected by decisions are heard and can feel empowered to make their own decisions that are appropriate for their specific circumstances by having a range of options and choices.

Very often, when it comes to economic development proposals, for example, these proposals are put forward by proponents who commission an environmental and social impact assessment of the potential for environmental degradation (e.g., mining projects producing toxic waste) and/or social harms (e.g., low-quality jobs requiring workers to be separated from their families and do hazardous work for weeks at a time). The entire approvals system is reactive, and the burden of proof to demonstrate the harms is on those who could be affected. A more proactive approach would involve multiple stakeholders from the outset to consider what kinds of economic development measures would be the most desirable – initiatives that are environmentally sustainable, that offer opportunities for meaningful work or that can bolster local economies through spin-off businesses and even sustain a vibrant social economy. It is important to also recognize the challenges that historically disadvantaged populations may face through a changing economy and take an impartial transition approach when implementing environmental control policies.

Post-COVID-19, many countries will be in deficit situations, with little resources to provide social safety nets, yet those are preconditions for the capacity to revitalize the economy and create a sustainable health system. A healthy economy and a more socially equitable society are necessary prerequisites for an affordable and thus sustainable health system. Creating jobs, increasing access to quality housing, providing food security and enabling support for persons living with disabilities or facing other social challenges will be essential if we want to create the world that we all would like to live in, as described in *The Future We Want* (United Nations 2012). It is not acceptable to return to the status quo. We must not forget the benefits of prevention and planning ahead as human nature usually has a tendency to wait to react until a crisis occurs.

Conclusion

We are the stewards of the environment that we inherit, and we have a duty to leave the world in a better state than when we found it. Combining traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and scientific knowledge is key to improving our environment and the way to ensure the future well-being of all people. Indigenous elders speak of "s/he makes a good path, puts it on right" – *miyumuhtaau* (Junker et al. 2018) – relying on wisdom, knowledge and human experience before heading in a given direction, to better understand the right path that must be taken no matter where that path leads us. This time around, things need to be done in a smarter, better, more inclusive and transparent way, to create a world that is both socially just and environmentally sustainable. One cannot exist without the other.

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