This January, I was selected by SGIM’s Health Policy Committee to serve on the steering committee for the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health. I am grateful for this opportunity to inform SGIM as well as the general public about the health effects of climate change and the benefits of prioritizing clean air and energy practices.

Our nation has recently witnessed the costly effects of extreme weather, which is one of the many health effects of human-driven global warming, along with emerging vector-borne diseases, food and waterborne disease, air pollution, food security, extreme temperatures, drought, as well as mental health disorders. Tropical storms Harvey and Irma together tallied 126 deaths at the time of this edition September 191,2, and the flooding has displaced whole communities from their physical homes, medical homes, and regular medication. Hurricane Harvey alone has projected economic costs of anywhere from $70-90 billion1 to $190 billion2, depending on the analysis. Conservative estimates account for direct costs of wind, storm surge, and inland flooding, while the higher range considers “total negative impact to the economy”, according to J Myers of Accuweather3. As is true with most instances of extreme weather, the recent hurricanes have adversely impacted a disproportionate number of people with low socio-economic status: people in poverty, the homeless, the elderly and disabled, and those with chronic medical conditions.

Climate science is complex, with interrelated waves of cause and effect that are oftentimes politicized and negated in our society. That being said, 99% of climate scientists internationally believe climate change is real. Health effects of our changing climate can be devastating. Since the majority of these effects are known to be human-caused, we as physician leaders have great potential to lead by example in our lifestyle, education, and advocacy efforts. By prioritizing clean air and energy practices, we can help reduce projected global temperature and sea level rise, and therefore improve health outcomes for ourselves, for our families, for our patients and for future generations.

As SGIM’s representative, I want to update fellow members on the Consortium’s launch in March, propose several action items for moving forward, and encourage members to join the Environmental Health Interest Group.

**The Consortium’s Launch**

In March 2017 in Washington, DC, the Medical Society Consortium for Climate and Health launched its first press release with its first report: *Medical Alert! Climate Change is Harming Our Health*. This was the culmination of months of research and outreach by Consortium Program Director and Founder Dr. Mona Sarfaty and her staff at George Mason’s Center for Climate Communications.

The event began with an informative six-hour meeting among steering committee members from the following medical societies: American Academy of Asthma, Allergy, and Immunology, American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP), American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG), American College of Physicians (ACP), American College of Preventative Medicine, American Podiatric Medical Association, and National Medical Association (NMA). We brainstormed about how to engage respective society members; heard from a lobbyist and former self-proclaimed “climate-denier” on how to frame climate adaptation and mitigation messages to more conservative lawmakers; and learned how other major stakeholders are tackling climate change within their organizations, which included the American Lung Association, the American Public Health Association (which has named 2017 the “Year of Action on Health and Climate”), the Ohio Clinicians for Climate Action, and Healthcare Without Harm.

The following day, a group of other steering committee members, society leaders, and affiliate organizations (e.g., APHA and Kaiser Permanente Total Health) assembled for a live press conference hosted in the Washington, DC, office of the Kaiser Permanente Center for Total Health. Dr. Sarfaty headed the panel, which also included two medical society presidents—Dr. Geilhaus of ACOG and Dr. Dahmle of ACP, Dr. Patz from UW Madison Global Health Institute, a pediatrician, an internist, and a representative from a parents’ organization on climate justice. After a brief Q

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and A session, the Steering Committee walked to the Capitol to disseminate copies of the Medical Alert to members of Congress. I visited a staffer for Senator Michael Bennet (D–CO), who has demonstrated a favorable voting record toward clean air and energy issues throughout his seven years in office.

The public launch of the Consortium in March was well attended, both in-person and virtually via wide news coverage of the event. Some main news outlets covering the event included CBS, NBC, USA Today, and Voice of America. It was also widely covered by medical media outlets such as AMA Morning Rounds, the AAP Smart Brief, AAP News, ACP in the News, Scientific American, and Medscape. Since March, the George Mason Center for Climate Communications continues to issue its monthly newsletters and the Medical Society Consortium issues periodic letters to Congress and the President on climate-related issues. We also have phone meetings where we can brainstorm further ways we as leaders can promote the Consortium’s mission:

To inform the public and policymakers about the harmful health effects of climate change on Americans, and about the immediate and long-term health benefits associated with greenhouse gas emissions ... and other preventative and protective measures.

Several medical societies have already issued formal statements on the health effects of climate change. Others educate their members and the public on the medical arguments behind clean energy and lowered carbon emissions. To highlight examples of different societies and their climate change infrastructure, the ACP issued a position paper in 2016 along with a “climate change toolbox”: a list of climate action items, fact sheets, and educational slides for its members. In 2015, ACOG also issued a position statement on climate change and maternal/fetal health. Through their government affairs committee, ACOG also keeps a scorecard on the various legislators, rating them, among other things, by their stance for/against toxic prenatal exposures. The NMA has a health and equity curriculum. The AAFP has a commission for health and climate policy. Multiple societies include presentations on climate at their national meetings. Since the 1950s, the AAP has had a council on environmental health, which holds various workshops and training sessions for their members.

**Action Items for Moving Forward**

To build on the momentum of this event and to increase awareness among SGIM of the health effects of climate change, a small group of like-minded individuals met in Washington, DC, at the SGIM 2017 National Meeting to brainstorm ways to achieve our goals. At the meeting we discussed our vision for climate change action and environmental health as a broader issue within our medical society: to exist in the form of a committee or subcommittee, generating advocacy resources (a “tool kit”) for members, and serving as an official forum to issue real-time commentary on current events with environmental health impacts. We see ourselves creating both standard- and CME-eligible educational materials. As one informational tool for gauging SGIM members’ interest, Professor Ed Maibach at George Mason’s Center for Climate Change Education has offered the use of his survey on climate change and health, which we will circulate soon among SGIM members. The NMA surveyed its members with Dr. Maibach’s tool and found the feedback very helpful.

_{The Lancet_, in a recent article, proclaimed climate change the “biggest health threat of the 21st century”}. The APHA is running a monthly education campaign throughout 2017 labeled the Year of Climate Change and Health. Recent extreme weather events have shown that this is as an important time as any for climate awareness and action.

**SGIM’s Environmental Health Interest Group**

Individual SGIM members are engaged in environmental health issues through the Environmental Health Interest Group. Last January GIM members predating this interest group helped publish an entire issue of the Forum dedicated to the topic. This is an opportune time to organize our efforts. I invite you to join the environmental health interest group, which is expanding its efforts, and to complete the online climate and health survey later this year.

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Please feel free to contact me at elizabeth.gillespie@dhha.org with any comments or questions.

To learn more about the Consortium, or to read its report, Medical Alert! go to https://medsocietiesforclimatehealth.org/reports/medical-alert/.

References