

FROM THE EDITOR

The World Changes and GIM Responds

Karen R. Horowitz, MD

Editor in Chief, SGIM Forum

It is remarkable how an environmental catastrophe can define a place and disrupt its communities. When I arrived in Buffalo, New York, in 1979, the disastrous impact of chemical dumping in Love Canal and its effects on the community of Niagara Falls, New York, had just come to national attention. To members of the entering SUNY medical school class, the suffering experienced by that community and the medical and political consequences which followed added meaning to the emerging discipline of environmental health care and created a sense of urgency for each of us. Since then, many years have passed and, with them, more questions than answers have emerged regarding our relationship with the environment and our responsibility for stewardship of the earth.

We often separate ourselves psychologically from geopolitical tragedies. Tsunamis in the Philippines, earthquakes in Haiti, epidemics in Africa, nuclear disasters in Japan—even those events we have experienced vicariously through television and social media are often experiences we leave behind when we turn off our electronic devices at the end of the day.

I once traveled to Hiroshima, Japan, to the Peace Memorial Park and Museum at ground zero. On a sunny morning in May, with cherry blossoms still in bloom, school children wandered through the park and attentively listened to their teachers describing the significance of the place. My discomfort with being an American at that moment was real, but was tempered by the museum guides who insisted that Hiroshima's enduring message transcends any inclination toward finger pointing. Rather, it mandates each of us to bear witness to the horror of those events and commit ourselves to the elimination of nuclear weapons.

Since that trip, the world has seemed smaller, and the needs of faraway communities are more real to me than they had been before. I cannot separate images of Hurricane Katrina from the city of New Orleans or the World Trade Center attacks from New York City. We were *all* New Yorkers on September 11, 2001. The children of Flint, Michigan, are now all our children.

In this issue of *SGIM Forum*, we explore the intersection of environmental health and the world of pri-

mary care. From these and many other events, one unifying truth emerges: Whether triggered by forces of nature or acts of man, our changing planet presents ongoing challenges to which healthcare systems must adapt and evolve.

Primary care physicians are and will continue to be frontline defenders of public health. We must maintain vigilance in our anticipation of the effects of environmental change on the health of our communities and advocate for effective systems to diagnose and manage these issues as they emerge. I hope you find this issue of *Forum* informative and thought provoking.

References

1. Brown M. *Laying Waste: The Poisoning of America by Toxic Chemicals*. New York, NY: Washington Square Press; 1981.
2. Deichmann R. *Code Blue: A Katrina Physician's Memoir*. Bloomington, NY: iUniverse Star; 2007.
3. Southard S. *Nagasaki: Life after Nuclear War*. New York, NY: Viking Press; 2015. (Also available in multiple audiobook formats.)