

CLIMATE HEALTH ACTIVISM: TWENTY YEARS OUT AND COUNTING

Robert M. Gould, MD

The dawn of CHE came at a cusp of our environmental health movement, when health professionals moved beyond efforts to reduce pollution emanating from the healthcare sector, toward transforming healthcare to respond to our climate crisis.

Since the founding of Health Care Without Harm in 1996, many of us had focused on working with our colleagues within California Medical Association (CMA) to support policies such as eliminating mercury from our hospital systems, and to stop the incineration of medical waste, curbing toxic streams that were poisoning our most dumped-on, and poorest communities, mostly of color.

In 2002, CMA's adoption of two resolutions, "Air Pollution, Energy, and Health," and "Climate Change and Human Health," signaled a remarkable sea-change of climate health activism among committed health professionals increasingly propelled by younger colleagues. Over the past 20 years, working in specialty societies, county, and national health professional associations, and in health systems across the country, policies ranging from institutionalizing climate-health curriculum to healthcare sector divestment from fossil fuels have now gained national traction.

Emblematic of this welcome transformation was the unprecedented coordination of over 200 worldwide medical and health journals in the publication of an editorial in 2021 declaring the anticipated rise in global temperatures to be "the greatest threat to global public health," and calling for our governments to urgently cooperate in investing adequately to redress our environmental crisis to avoid risking "catastrophic harm to health that will be impossible to reverse."

Unfortunately, this revolution of consciousness has crashed up against the global disruptions posed by COVID and unabated militarism exemplified by the brutal war in Ukraine. Beyond the already horrific costs of human lives and uprooting of millions, we now face heightened dangers of nuclear weapons use, and the risk of a catastrophic radiation release from nuclear reactors operating in the conflict zone.



Our government and its allies have responded to war-induced energy disruptions by promoting increased production of oil and gas. This, coupled with "false solutions" to our energy and climate crisis, exemplified by accelerated support for nuclear power and unproven "carbon capture" proposals, will delay us from making the rapid transformation to the truly clean energy systems we need to survive.

In the wake of vastly increased U.S. military and nuclear weapons budgets, the recently passed Inflation Reduction Act (IRA), while providing significant support for promising green technologies, simultaneously perpetuates fossil fuel extraction. The IRA has been largely stripped of the original "Build Back Better" programs that our most overburdened communities were promised to enable their full participation in a "Just Transition" to a green future.

To fully support the health of our patients and our communities, we will need to redouble our efforts to help build an intersectional movement that is local, national, and global in its vision, and capable of developing the political power to transform our world so we can protect and restore our web of life to survive as one species among many. -||



Robert M. Gould, MD, is an Associate Adjunct Professor with UCSF's Program on Reproductive Health and the Environment (PRHE), a member of the Santa Clara County Medical Association, and long-time President of SF Bay Physicians for Social Responsibility.