



URBAN PUBLIC HEALTH NETWORK
RÉSEAU CANADIEN POUR LA SANTÉ URBAINE

SECRETARIAT:

November 6, 2009

DR GERRY PREDY

CAPITAL HEALTH

SUITE 300

10216 - 124 STREET,

EDMONTON AB

T5N 4A3

The Right Honorable Stephen Harper, MP
Prime Minister of Canada
House of Commons
Ottawa, ON K1A 0A6

**RE: The importance of Canada's role in the upcoming
international conference on climate change**

As chief medical officers of the 18 largest urban centres in Canada, we would like to bring to your attention the very important impact that the decisions taken at the upcoming United Nations conference on climate change to be held in Copenhagen will have on the health of Canadians and all inhabitants of the globe. As you know, the scientific consensus leaves no doubt. The most recent data published in September of this year by the United Nations Programme for the Environment (Climate Change Science Compendium 2009) show that the rate and the degree of climate change have gone beyond the levels anticipated by the 2007 report of the Intergovernmental panel on climate change (IPCC) due to the increasing concentration of greenhouse gases (GHG) in the atmosphere. The Secretary General of the United Nations has made an exceptionally serious call to action in the foreword to the Compendium where he states, "We need the world to realize, once and for all, that the time to act is now and we must work together to address this monumental challenge. This is the moral challenge of our generation."

As Sir Michael Marmot, eminent epidemiologist and president of the WHO Commission on the social determinants of health has recently reminded us in the September 19th edition of the Lancet (volume 373), the evolution of climate brought on by human activities is a threat to the health, and possibly to the survival of entire populations at the national and international levels. In Canada, the major problems related to climate change are:

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- more frequent and severe heat waves contributing to premature deaths among the elderly population living alone in urban heat islands with no access to air conditioning, and
- an increase in extreme weather events such as floods and tornadoes which have important physical and psychological impacts and cause severe material damage.

Different regions in Canada will be affected differently and Natural Resources Canada has presented the different impacts for all the regions in Canada in its 2007 publication entitled *From Impacts to Adaptation: Canada in a Changing Climate 2007*. Some of these impacts include reduced summer water supply and increased risk of forest fires, the latter problem affecting not only the survival of Canadian forests but also air quality nearby and in urban areas at greater distances from the fires.

On a planetary level, many different phenomena will affect the health of entire populations and will provoke conflicts and vast population movements which could put extreme levels of pressure on refugee and immigrant settlement programmes here in Canada and several other countries. Two major phenomena that could result from climate change are:

- desertification which will reduce agricultural productivity, leading to more frequent and longer famines thus compromising the nutritional health of millions of people, and
- elevation of the levels of oceans subsequent to the melting of glaciers creating despair among many Pacific Ocean island populations who would be at risk of losing their homes and the land on which they live.

The distribution of the health impacts brought about by climate change also raises important ethical issues, since the populations most severely affected are those living in developing and poor countries, the very countries that have contributed the least to the problem. According to the compilations of the World Resources Institute, the population of poor and developing countries represented 80% of the world population in 2004, but these countries were responsible for 41% of GHG emissions. From a historical perspective, these same countries are responsible for less than one quarter of overall emissions since the onset of the Industrial Revolution (mid to late 18th century). On the other end of the spectrum, Canada, which represents only 0.5% of the world population produced 2.2% of GHG emissions in 2007. Canadians are among the greatest emitters on a per capita basis with 22.6 t



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(in 2005), more than double than the citizens of the European Union (10.5t) and four times more those of China (5.5 t).

Given the level of GHG emissions for which Canada is responsible and the important health effects related to climate change, we believe that it is essential that Canada respond to the call made by the Secretary General of the United Nations by leading the way and stating clearly how it intends to reduce its GHG emissions. The best way to start is to adopt policies now which are based on the consensus reached by the international scientific community.

This consensus has established that it is necessary to limit both the concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere and the global temperature increase to less than 2⁰ C in order to avoid the catastrophes described previously. A reduction of GHG emissions of 50 to 85% by 2050 with respect to 1990 levels would be necessary to have a 50% probability to not exceed the above mentioned increases in the atmospheric concentration of CO₂ and temperature levels. In order to attain this objective, intermediate goals must be determined for the year 2020. For example, the European Union has already pledged to reduce its emissions by 20% with respect to 1990 levels and could go to 30% if other countries follow suit. (*20 20 by 2020, Europe's climate change opportunity* Commission of European communities, January 23rd 2008). The Canadian government's objective of a 20% reduction of emissions in 2020 based on 2006 levels amounts to a 3% reduction based on 1990 levels, which is clearly insufficient. Such a target is also very much below Canada's possibilities and does not reflect the role played by Canada in producing the problem

In order to adequately slow the progression of climate change it will be necessary to undertake major changes in the way we live and work, but this in no way means that Canadians must lower their living standards. As clearly pointed out by the Stern report, the costs associated with postponing action will be much greater than the cost of acting now. In addition, the challenge of dealing with climate change gives us the opportunity to reorient our economy and the way we travel, which would allow Canada to become less carbon intensive and less dependent on non renewable natural resources. The most recent report of the Conference Board of Canada (*Carbon Disclosure Project 2009 : Canada 2009*) noted that more and more Canadian enterprises see more opportunities than risks in this new context of reducing GHG emissions. Therefore, such a reorientation would not only be associated with other important health gains: decrease in cardiorespiratory disease related to air pollution, decrease in traffic accidents brought about by

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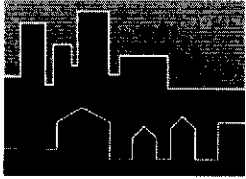
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diminishing travel by car and increasing public and active transportation, decrease in diseases related to physical inactivity caused by dependence on the car for all destinations. It would also create a potential for economic development based on new technologies.

In conclusion, Mr. Prime Minister, we strongly believe that the protection of public health in Canada and throughout the world requires an ambitious objective for the reduction of GHG emissions between now and 2020. We thus urge you to mobilize all sectors of Canadian society to take up this challenge and to play a leadership role in the Copenhagen Conference.

Yours sincerely,

Chief Medical Officers of Health of major urban centers of Canada

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cc The Honorable James Prentice
Minister of the the Environment

Donald Mowat
[Signature]

PEEL PUBLIC HEALTH
Edmonton

[Signature]

Middlesex-London, Ontario

[Signature]

Québec City Region

Line Unit

Alberta Health Services - Calgary

VANCOUVER

[Signature]

Patricia Duly MD, FRCPC

[Signature]

Louis Drouin, Montreal, Quebec

REGINA

[Signature]

Tania Diener, MBChB, MMed (Com Health), MPA, DTM, MFTM RCPS (Glasg)
Regina Qu'Appelle Health Region

[Signature]

Dr. David McKeown

Medical Officer of Health

Toronto Public Health