

Oral Testimony for the House Committee on Oversight and Reform

Hearing: “The Devastating Health Impacts of Climate Change”

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Testimony of:

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Thank you to Chairwoman Maloney, Ranking Member Comer, and members of the Oversight and Reform committee for holding this hearing and inviting me.

I testify before you as a practicing emergency medicine doctor who is on both the frontlines of the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have dedicated my professional life to preventing harm and improving health for my patients through my clinical work, where I received my training in Ohio – not far from my home in Michigan, and through my work at the nexus of climate change and health care.

I chose emergency medicine because it provides me the unique privilege of treating whoever walks into my department – and it is a beautiful palette of humanity every shift – from the homeless to the professional sports players.

Every life is equally valued and provided equal care.

I am honored to be here today to represent my patients and bring their often-unheard voices to these halls of power because the decisions that get made here have widespread health ramifications for everyone.

Patients like the young, strong and otherwise healthy construction worker who had two jobs to support his growing family in record-breaking heat.

By the time he arrived at my emergency department, his organs were already failing as we rapidly tried to cool him.

His story showcases that no one is invincible.

Or patients like the elderly man whose wife called 911 because he was acting confused.

The medics said that the temperature in their apartment felt like the Sahara Desert because they had no air conditioning and only one open window.

The man's core temperature was 106°F.

When I tell this story, I often wonder about his wife who remained in the apartment that day while her husband was taken to the hospital.

His story underscores that vulnerable populations, like the elderly, poor, certain racial minorities, and children are currently bearing the brunt of the health harms from climate change.

And her story represents those that are left behind.

These patients may seem different in many respects – but they are joined together by one common vulnerability – both faced death from heat stroke – the most severe form of heat illness – and just one of the enormously broad ways in which climate change harms health.

My medical training prepared me to treat patients with heat stroke, but climate change is increasingly threatening the tools that I need to do it as extreme heat and climate-intensified weather threaten our health care infrastructure, power, and supply chains.

Following Hurricane Maria, there was an intravenous saline shortage that even reached my hospital in Boston. We were forced to ration IV fluids and give the patients who didn't meet the severity criteria a bottle of Gatorade.

This story highlights the far-reaching implications of cascading failures.

Carbon pollution - and the intricately connected air pollution - fueled by the production and use of fossil fuels - is making it harder for me to do my job and disrupting the health care systems I rely on to provide care to my community when people need it most.

For so many of my patients harmed by climate change, I often feel as I am putting a band aid on a bullet wound as I may be able to improve their symptoms but then I send them back out my doors without having gone upstream to the root of the problem.

The climate crisis, as both a “metaproblem” – meaning it underlies other problems - and as a “threat multiplier”, meaning it is making existing problems worse.

Thus, climate change touches everything and is creating headwinds to successfully tackle our nation’s most pressing health challenges of today, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

In my emergency department, I can’t take just one health problem and place it in isolation when treating a patient.

One insult on the body creates new problems and worsens old ones, just like climate change.

Thus, we must take an integrated approach when tackling these problems.

As members of Congress, you have the power to create real, upstream solutions that can address the root causes of climate change and help build the health systems that can prevent illness or death in my patients in the first place.

The pandemic has placed a focus on health issues in our country like never before in our lifetimes and exposed our underfunded public health infrastructure and fragile health care systems.

More importantly, it has shown us that when we ignore the science and delay action, people die.

I am here to urge you to make health the driver of climate action

to recognize the goal of protecting health as common ground for all of us

to take an integrated approach when seeking solutions for these problems

and to collectively vow to learn from the suffering and loss we are experiencing with the pandemic and avoid the same mistake with the climate crisis.

My colleagues and I in the health community are running out of band aids, and our patients need definitive treatments upstream of our exam rooms.

But we need your help.

Thank you for your time.