

Advocacy Case: Family Physicians Advocate for Climate Action

Jeff Huebner, MD

UW School of Medicine and Public Health, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health

Problem Statement:

The effects of global climate change threaten our planet and human health, with a disproportionately severe impact on lower-income countries and communities of color. We all increasingly feel the impacts of global warming, such as wildfires, flooding, cyclones, and sea-level rise. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change recently highlighted the emergency we face in order to prevent a global temperature rise of more than 1.5 degrees Celsius this century, which would critically harm our planet. Without urgent collective action, we risk increasing illness and death due to extreme weather, air pollution, and changing vector ecology, while facing food, water, and migration crises.

Background:

Physicians play a critical role in advocating for sustainability initiatives that will eliminate carbon emissions. In 2019, the American Academy of Family Physicians joined others to issue a Call to Action that provided 10 policy recommendations to combat climate change. Family physicians at the University of Wisconsin (UW) are advocating for change both within local health systems, including our own, and at the policy level.

Methods:

Several family physicians at UW have partnered with others to help launch and lead *Wisconsin Health Professionals for Climate Action* (www.wiclimatehealth.org). Its mission is to highlight climate change as a public health emergency and advocate for equitable solutions to reduce its impact on human health, including asking Wisconsin health systems to become carbon-neutral. A smaller group of three also has led recent efforts to educate our health system's leadership on the pivotal role of divestment from fossil fuels as an action strategy.

Outcomes:

Since its founding, WHPCA's credits include: two CME conferences, a legislative candidate guide, media training, media appearances, and the engagement of local health systems in efforts to de-carbonize their footprints.

UW Health Investment Committee voted in November 2021 to implement a screening system to remove and avoid any new equity investments on the "Carbon Underground 200" and they plan to continue working with their investment team on developing a long-term ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) strategy.