

THE CODE SAYS

The AMA *Code of Medical Ethics*' Opinions Related to Climate Change

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Although climate change has a negative effect on public health [1], health care professionals' perceived role in [educating patients](#) about climate change is often overlooked [2]. However, the American Medical Association (AMA) recognizes the importance of climate and health. The AMA adopted a policy ("Global Climate Change and Human Health," H-135.938) that underscores the reality and urgency of climate change and the necessity for a physician role in protecting public health as it relates to climate change. The policy states that the AMA "supports educating the medical community on the potential [adverse public health effects](#) of global climate change" and "encourages physicians to assist in educating patients and the public on environmentally sustainable practices, and to serve as role models for promoting environmental sustainability" [3]. While the *Code of Medical Ethics* does not outline specific plans of action for physicians to address climate change, it does provide guidance for physician involvement in public health concerns, specifically in preventive care and disaster response and preparedness.

Opinion 8.11, "Health Promotion and Preventive Care" [4], states that physicians should "consider the [health of the community](#) when treating their own patients and identify and notify public health authorities if and when they notice patterns in patient health that may indicate a health risk for others." Physicians can utilize this guidance to observe and [report patterns of illnesses](#) for which climate change poses increased risk, such as asthma, respiratory allergies, skin cancers, cataracts, food and waterborne illnesses, cardiovascular disease, and stroke, among others [1]. Opinion 8.11 continues with guidance stating that physicians should "recognize that modeling health behaviors can help patients make changes in their own lives" [4], which suggests that physicians should make a serious effort to model environmentally conscious behaviors that promote health, such as wearing sunscreen, in order to encourage patients to make behavioral changes and also states that physicians should advocate for healthier communities and the resources to make this happen.

Another piece of guidance, Opinion 8.3, "Physicians' Responsibilities in Disaster Response and Preparedness" [5], discusses the role of physicians in responding to large-scale public health crises. The opinion states, "individual physicians should: Take appropriate advance measures, including acquiring and maintaining appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure they are able to provide medical services when needed" [5]. This points to the need for physicians to gain knowledge and tools to effectively

manage and prevent disease outbreaks like Zika, to which climate change contributes [6].

Potential public health concerns such as those related to climate change should be carefully analyzed by physicians and other health care workers in order to ensure that education, treatment, and relief is available if and when it is needed. Physicians can also play a role in the education and dissemination of important health-related information concerning environmental degradation and climate change [3].

References

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