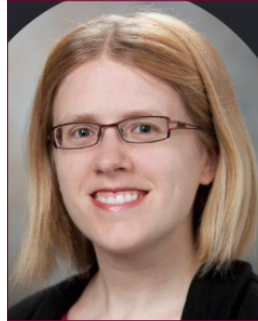


Q&A: RI Physicians Sound Clarion Call on Climate Change

MARY KORR
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

The *Rhode Island Medical Journal* (RIMJ) reached out to the leadership of the Rhode Island Medical Society's (RIMS) Climate Change and Health Committee (CC&H), inaugurated in 2022, to further introduce its efforts to physicians, healthcare providers, and medical students in the State who may be interested in combatting what the World Health Organization (WHO) has termed one of the greatest threats to global health.

In its short existence, the group has made its presence known to policymakers and stakeholders. It has testified at the State House on budget measures affecting funding of the RI Act on Climate, as well as submitting written testimony on bills regarding the use of gasoline powered lawn equipment, pyrolysis, and the adoption of California emissions standards. Members also testified at the United States Senate Finance Committee in Washington, DC, on the effects of



Alison Hayward, MD, MPH



Kelly McGarry, MD



Loree Kalliainen, MD

climate change on human health.

The group meets monthly, on the third Thursday evening of each month from 7–8 p.m., (next meeting September 21) and hosts guest speakers who discuss the importance of the impact climate change has on the healthcare industry, patients, and communities and populations at risk.

Inaugural and outgoing Chair of the group **ALISON HAYWARD, MD, MPH**, Assistant Professor in the Divisions of

Education and Global Health in the Department of Emergency Medicine at the Alpert Medical School (AMS), and incoming co-chairs, AMS Professor of Medicine **KELLY MCGARRY, MD**, and Associate Professor of Surgery, **LOREE KALLIAINEN, MD**, responded to the following inquiries from RIMJ on accomplishments during the past year, ongoing climate issues and challenges, and upcoming plans for a spring 2024 symposium.

New York City covered in an eerie orange smoke from Canadian wildfires caused hazardous air quality for everyone in early June, as shown in this photo. [NYC STOCK PHOTOS]

Q. Physicians can play a unique role in educating their colleagues and communities about climate change and its health impacts, and in advocating for policies to address this problem. Why did you get involved with climate change and why is it important to be involved?

A. AH: I've always been very passionate about environmental issues, and it has become clear that climate change is the environmental emergency our planet is currently facing. This issue requires our utmost attention. In recent years as the effects of climate change are becoming more and more apparent, touching our

Physician testimony and advocacy on important topics is very influential and should not be underestimated. We can all make a difference.

—Alison Hayward, MD

daily lives, the importance of physicians speaking out about climate change and advocating for planetary health is paramount. The sweeping effects that climate change is having and will continue to have on our patients cannot be understated. Physician testimony and advocacy on important topics is very influential and should not be underestimated. We can all make a difference.

Q. Are there populations most impacted by the effects of climate change on human health?

A. AH, KM, LK: As we know, climate change impacts people's health and well-being by altering the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. The result is reduced air quality and the spread of various diseases. The burdens of pollution, toxic waste, and contaminated resources are not distributed equally across society. Those most vulnerable to these effects include people who have lost their jobs because of flooding or drought, who may not have money to pay for needed medications or for food. The health effects of climate change have

disproportionate impact on communities of color, resulting in disparities termed environmental racism and resulting in the movement for environmental justice. Those experiencing socioeconomic inequality cannot choose as easily where they live and often live in cities ("heat islands"), and locations more vulnerable to natural disasters.

The elderly and those with housing insecurity may also have difficulty escaping excessive heat, and the heat may be more a challenge on their systems. Climate change can contribute to air pollutant levels through increased usage of electricity for cooling, resulting in smog, increased levels of fine particulate matter, and acid rain. These environmental phenomena in turn cause exacerbation of illness in people of all ages with cardiac and pulmonary disease, as well as heat-related illness.

Those who work outdoors, or children who tend to spend more time outdoors are additionally uniquely vulnerable to these health issues, as well as potentially to the increased geographic range of vector-borne infectious diseases that continues to extend from tropical weather zones into what had traditionally been more temperate climates.

Q. What positive impact has the committee had on the intersection of climate change and health in Rhode Island?

A. AH, KM, LK: The Climate Change and Health Committee has been able to provide both in-person and written testimony on a number of important pieces of legislature being considered by our State in the past year. We have sent letters to the speakers of the House and Senate to advise them of what we feel are the greatest legislative priorities for the health of our patients related to climate change and environmental concerns. We have also provided a forum for speakers from various medical specialties to address an interdisciplinary audience of like-minded physicians and medical students on topics

related to climate change and health, and to share ideas about how to lessen negative environmental effects/reduce our carbon footprint in the healthcare system.

Q. How are the physicians of tomorrow being prepared to address the health impact of climate change?

A. AH, KM, LK: Brown's Alpert Medical School has been at the forefront of incorporating climate change effects on health into the medical school curriculum. Members of the CC&H committee have participated in the Planetary Health Curriculum Task Force, ensuring that climate change and health issues are integrated throughout the courses that students at AMS take. A Planetary Health elective has also recently been offered.

Q. Can you offer some details on the climate change & health symposium planned by the committee in 2024 in Rhode Island.

A. AH, KM, LK: Planned for spring 2024, the Climate Change and Health Symposium has received grant funding through a Brown University Office of Sustainability and Resiliency "Sustainability Seed Grant". The symposium is expected to bring together local and regional speakers on topics related to climate change and health advocacy, research, and other public health initiatives. We hope to include panel discussions and action-oriented workshops where participants from all sectors of the Brown University community, as well as the greater Rhode Island community, can network and collaborate on ideas. The symposium will be designed to minimize carbon footprint/environmental impact through various means, including electronic posters, virtual participation options, and collaborative community transportation options. ❖

Contact information

For more information on the committee, read about it on RIMS website: <https://rimedicalsociety.org/climate-change-and-health-committee>, or contact Stacy Paterno at spaterno@rimed.org.