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VOLUME 48:4 • WINTER 2020

Symposium Articles

Climate Change and the Legal, Ethical, and Health Issues Facing Healthcare and Public Health Systems

Guest Edited by Chandra Ganesh, Michael Schmeltz, and Jason Smith

Cover image ©Getty Images

In 2014, the United States health care industry produced an estimated 480 million metric tons of carbon dioxide (CO2); nearly 8% of the country's total emissions. The importance of sustainability in health care — as a business reliant on fossil fuels for transportation, energy, and operational functioning — is slowly being recognized. These efforts to green health care are incomplete, since they only focus on health care structures. The therapeutic relationship is the essence of health care — not the buildings that contain the practice. As such, this article will first postulate reasons for a lack of environmental sustainability in US health care. Second, the article will focus on current green health care initiatives in the United States in which patients and physicians participate. Third, the rationale for participation in green initiatives will be explained. Fourth, the article will propose that, based on the environmental values of patients and physicians, health care insurance plans and health care insurance companies can be targeted for green health care reform, thereby closing the loop of sustainable health care delivery.

Over the last century, droughts have caused more deaths internationally than any other weather- or climate-related disaster. Like other natural disasters, droughts cause significant changes in the environment that can lead to negative health outcomes. As droughts are becoming more frequent and intense with climate change, public health systems need to address impacts associated with these events. Partnering with federal and local entities, we evaluated the state of knowledge of drought and health in the United States through a National Drought and Public Health Summit and a series of subsequent regional workshops. The intended outcome was to develop public health strategies for implementing activities to better support and prepare public health systems for future droughts. The information gathered from this work identified multiple policy and law options to address the public health issues associated with drought. These policy recommendations include the use of public health emergency declarations for drought events, increased usage of preparedness evaluations for drought emergencies, and engagement of drought and climate experts in state and local risk assessments. As drought events are projected to increase in frequency and magnitude with climate change, taking policy action now will help decrease the health impacts of drought and save lives.

The power to change the natural environment has received relatively little attention in public health law, yet is a core concern within environmental and agricultural law. Examples from environmental and agricultural law may inform efforts to change the natural environment in order to reduce the health impacts of climate change. Public health lawyers who attend to the natural environment may succeed in elevating health concerns within the environmental and agricultural law spheres, while gaining new tools for their public health law toolbox.

Amid public health concerns over climate change, "precision public health" (PPH) is emerging in next generation approaches to practice. These novel methods promise to augment public health operations by using ever larger and more robust health datasets combined with new tools for collecting and analyzing data. Precision strategies to protecting the public health could more effectively or efficiently address the systemic threats of climate change, but may also propagate or exacerbate health disparities for the populations most vulnerable in a changing climate. How PPH interventions collect and aggregate data, decide

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Columns

Symposium articles *are solicited by the guest editor for the purposes of creating a comprehensive and definitive collection of articles on a topic relevant to the study of law, medicine and ethics. Each article is peer reviewed.*

Independent articles *are essays unrelated to the symposium topic, and can cover a wide variety of subjects within the larger medical and legal ethics fields. These articles are peer reviewed.*

Columns *are written or edited by leaders in their fields and appear in each issue of JLME.*

Next Issue:

Public Sector and Non-Profit Contributions to Drug Development: Historical Scope, Opportunities, and Challenges

A Symposium Guest Edited by Ameet Sarpatwari

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