
The climate crisis is a health crisis

EDITORIAL

GUNNAR KVÅLE

E-mail: gunnar.kvale@cih.uib.no

Gunnar Kvåle, medical doctor, professor emeritus and former head of the Centre for International Health at the University of Bergen. He is a board member of The Norwegian Grandparents' Climate Campaign.

The author has completed the ICMJE form and declares no conflicts of interest.

A three-degree global temperature increase will give rise to a number of health challenges and widespread mortality. To prevent this, radical changes in policy and society are urgently needed.

Poor people in countries near the Equator will be affected first and most severely, and serious damage will gradually become evident also in other climate zones [\(1\)](#). A report from the World Bank presents estimates showing that climate change may force more than 100 million people into extreme poverty by 2030 [\(2\)](#). When global warming approaches 3 °C, heat, drought, cyclones, sea level rise and floods will affect an increasing proportion of the world's population and cause great damage and many deaths.

For many years, medical journals have warned against the health consequences [\(3, 4\)](#). Malnutrition, famine, diarrhoea and other infections are expected to spread. We can already now see a clear increase in the number of heatwaves that may be lethal even to healthy people who have no access to artificial means of cooling. Rising sea level will render large areas uninhabitable, forcing millions to flee. This will increase the risk of conflicts and wars causing further loss of life. Anxiety and depression associated with the destruction caused by extreme weather have been described [\(2, 5\)](#).

The introduction to a recent report from the Norwegian Red Cross on the humanitarian consequences of the climate crisis has the headline 'Climate action today or unimaginable suffering tomorrow' [\(5\)](#). Unfortunately, the serious messages from researchers, medical doctors and a unanimous environmental movement have not brought about political action sufficient to make a difference. The climate situation

calls for emergency measures. The policies pursued by the Norwegian political leadership are on a collision course with the requirements in the Paris Agreement (6) and help accelerate the serious health consequences.

Fossil-based overconsumption of goods and services is a main cause of both the climate crisis and the environmental crisis that are developing (7). The *Nature* journal writes: 'Reducing carbon emissions means making painful choices: halting new investments in the exploration and production of fossil fuels, and then closing down existing facilities' (8). The government should no longer ignore the warnings. A small, but important step would be to act upon the call from a large group of Norwegian climate researchers, medical doctors and others (9): Norway must stop exploring for oil and gas.

In the United States, more than 70 organisations for health workers, including the American Medical Association and many specialist associations, have recently launched a campaign under the banner 'Climate action for health' (10). It calls on politicians to recognise that climate change represents a health emergency and that the United States must follow up the Paris agreement that includes implementing a rapid transition from coal, oil and gas to renewable energy. In June this year, more than 1 000 medical doctors in the UK published an appeal with similar demands, including calls for non-violent demonstrations to promote this issue (11).

In Norway, the Norwegian Medical Association has adopted a resolution on climate, environment and public health that emphasises the association's international advocacy role (12). If the association in addition would use its position as a health-policy advisor to Norwegian authorities to take a clear stand and speak out on the serious health consequences associated with Norway's climate and petroleum policies, it might make a major impact.

We who know what failure to take action on climate change will entail, have a greater responsibility than others to take a leading role in fighting climate change. Joining with youth and other committed groups, we as health workers should call for forceful climate action. Much could be achieved if a growing number of people would emulate Greta Thunberg: Tell the truth about the climate crisis and what needs to be done, call for immediate policy change and let our deeds reflect our words.

LITERATURE

1. IPCC. Global Warming of 1.5°C. <https://www.ipcc.ch/sr15/> Lest 21.6.2019.
2. Hallegatte S, Bangalore M, Bonzanigo L et al. Shock waves: managing the impacts of climate change on poverty. Washington, DC: World Bank, 2016. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/22787/9781464806735.pdf> Lest 28.6.2019.
3. Watts N, Amann M, Arnell N et al. The 2018 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: shaping the health of nations for centuries to come. *Lancet* 2018; 392: 2479–514. [PubMed][CrossRef]
4. Costello A, Abbas M, Allen A et al. Managing the health effects of climate change. *Lancet* 2009; 373: 1693–733. [PubMed][CrossRef]

5. Bang HK, Hetland O, Tingberg T et al. Overlapping vulnerabilities. The impact of climate change on humanitarian needs. Oslo: Norwegian Red Cross, 2019>. https://www.rodekors.no/globalassets/globalt/rapporter-program-avtaler/humanitar-analyse-rapporter/norwegian-redcross_report_overlapping-vulnerabilities.pdf Lest 12.7.2019.
6. Climate Action Tracker. Norway, June 2019. <https://climateactiontracker.org/countries/norway/> Lest 21.6.2019.
7. Miljødirektoratet-NINA. Tilstandsrapport for naturen på jorda. <https://www.miljodirektoratet.no/globalassets/bilder/nyhetsdokumenter---old/nyheter-vedlegg/faktaark-versjon-10.pdf> Lest 18.6.2019.
8. Climate talks are not enough. Editorial. Nature 25.4.2018. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-018-04925-4> Lest 18.6.2019.
9. Lytt til ungdommen! Støtt oppropet: Norge må slutte å lete etter olje og gass. <https://www.underskrift.no/vis/7576> Lest 29.6.2019.
10. U.S. Medical Groups Warn Candidates. Climate Change Is a 'Health Emergency'. <https://insideclimatenews.org/news/24062019/us-health-groups-declare-climate-change-public-health-emergency-urge-fossil-fuel> Lest 28.6.2019.
11. Doctors against climate catastrophe. The Guardian 27.6.2019. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jun/27/doctors-against-climate-catastrophe> (28.6.2019).
12. Wærnes D. Klimaresolusjon og menneskerettighetsutvalg. <https://beta.legeforeningen.no/nyheter/2019/vedtok-klimaresolusjon-og-nytt-menneskerettighetsutvalg/> Lest 20.6.2019.

Publisert: 25 July 2019. Tidsskr Nor Legeforen. DOI: 10.4045/tidsskr.19.0473
Copyright: © Tidsskriftet 2026 Downloaded from tidsskriftet.no 14 July 2026.