

Advocacy in Planetary Health

By Claire E.H. Barber, MD, PhD, FRCPC

Climate change has been called a “code red” emergency for humanity by the Canadian Medical Association alongside other organizations. This framing helps to highlight the significant health impacts that climate change has on humanity alongside the urgency of the problem. Indeed, a growing proportion of Canadians are experiencing significant health impacts of climate change including direct displacement due to wild fires, floods and other extreme weather events, and elevated health risks from poor air quality during wildfire season and from extreme heat. Indigenous communities have been disproportionately impacted by these events. Similarly, individuals who are vulnerably housed, older adults, children, pregnant persons and those with chronic diseases are more vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change. Lastly, the mental health impacts of climate change are at epidemic proportions, especially among youth.

On a personal note, I have lived in Alberta since 2011, and my province has experienced some of the worst climate disasters in Canadian history, including massive wildfires, hailstorms, drought and flooding. Each spring, I watch as the river beside my home swells and worry whether this will be the year it floods again. In summer, I worry whether I can take my young daughter to play outside. I worry about travelling into the mountains with my family when the forest fire risk is high, as they have been predicting that the famous Bow Valley region may go up in flames for some time. My family has vacationed in recent years to several areas that burned to the ground the very next year—including Jasper National Park. In 2023, my daughter swam in a lake in interior BC as water bombers collected water from it to put out fires we could see nearby. This situation isn’t normal. I have a lot of anxiety about the world we are leaving for future generations. Compounding this stress is the reality that many government policies continue to prioritize industry interests and profits over long-term environmental strategy. This short-sightedness threatens the health of our planet and is costly for human health and well-being.¹ One evidence-based strategy for handling climate-based anxiety is climate action. Over the last several years I have been increasingly active on multiple personal and professional fronts to address climate change and one of them is advocacy.

Physicians have long been at the forefront of advocating for health and, indeed, this is a central tenet of competency for physicians in the CanMEDS framework.



Dr. Barber at a climate protest held during the World Petroleum Conference in downtown Calgary (the mask wearing was part of a performance piece led by one of the groups).

Physicians don’t need to be climate scientists; we can use our knowledge of the health impacts of climate change in the populations we care for to create evidence-based advocacy infused with storytelling and impact. This is what creates a powerful message for change.

How does climate change impact you and your family?
How are your patients impacted?

Who are you going to tell to make a difference?

While becoming an advocate in the space of climate change and health can seem daunting, there is lots that can be done — both big and small. Every little bit helps. Here are some ideas:

1. Write a letter to the editor.

- Pro tip: collaborate with friends or medical students to make this more fun.



Dr. Barber moderating a panel of experts at a Science and the Cinema event held at the Calgary public library to discuss the movie *Plastic People*.

b. View the links below for examples:

- <https://www.nationalobserver.com/2024/11/12/opinion/op-ed-alberta-coal-power-mine-expansion>
- <https://healthydebate.ca/2024/09/topic/fossil-fuels-ban-ads-greenwash/>

2. **Start or join an existing campaign:** This can be as easy as signing a petition or personalizing and forwarding a letter to your MLA or other government representative.

a. Want to do something right now? Check out active campaigns at these organizations

- <https://www.forourkids.ca>
- <https://davidsuzuki.org/>
- <https://cape.ca/>
- <https://cpaws.org/take-action/>
- <https://www.coalpetition.ca/>

3. **Ask to meet with a governmental representative:**

Go prepared with simple messaging and a clear request. Ask if you can leave them a policy brief or a 1-pager so they can spread the message, and whether you can follow up.

4. **Join a local committee or national organization:**

This can be as simple as joining a mailing list to ensure you are up to date with existing campaigns. You may want to attend monthly meetings and become more involved with local events. The bonus is making new friends and knowing you aren't alone in your fight for climate action.

5. **Support communication to the public:** This can be through 1:1 conversations with patients, family, and friends, or through sharing or creating posts for social media on relevant evidence-informed topics relating

to the health impacts of climate change. Regional or local organizations may also sponsor different events you can join or volunteer at to engage the public such as movie screenings with expert panels, or other community events.

6. **Attend a climate action protest:** When the World Petroleum Congress or the G7 Summit comes to your city, let them know how you feel. Gather some friends, get your kids to help you make some signs and join a peaceful protest.

7. **Donate:** If you are too short on time to do any of the above, consider donating to a group that does work in this space.

Reference:

1. Canadian Climate Institute. *The Costs of Climate Change: A Series of Five Reports* (2020). Available at <https://climateinstitute.ca/reports/the-costs-of-climate-change/>. Accessed March 5th, 2026.

*Claire E.H. Barber, MD, PhD, FRCPC
Associate Professor,
Department of Medicine
Department of Community Health Sciences
Associate Vice Chair of Planetary Health,
Department of Medicine
Cumming School of Medicine
University of Calgary*