



Commonwealth Health Professions Alliance

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May 2009

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH SURVEY

SUMMARY REPORT

The 2009 Commonwealth Health Ministers meeting (CHMM) to be held in Geneva 17 May 2009 has as its theme: *climate change and health*. In preparation for the CHMM, the Commonwealth Health Professions Alliance (CHPA) undertook a *Climate change and health* survey of health professionals in Commonwealth countries. Over 800 individuals from 42 of the 53 Commonwealth countries returned the survey, as well as a number of health professional associations who returned surveys on behalf of a membership numbering in excess of 200,000 individuals. Responses were received from nurses, doctors, pharmacists, dentists, community health workers and others such as dietitians, physiotherapists and health administrators. There were some key messages from health professionals in Commonwealth countries to Commonwealth Health Ministers.



MESSAGE 1: WE CARE, DO YOU?

An amazing 96% of respondents were personally concerned about global warming and climate change. They did not however have the same confidence in their governments' concern or preparedness. While 73.3% considered global warming was a concern to their government, only 43.8% considered their government had an action plan or high level committee on global warming and climate change and nearly 70% said they had no input into or access to the action plan or high level committee.



MESSAGE 2: INVOLVE US! WE WANT TO BE INVOLVED

Governments, even those with action plans to deal with global warming and climate change, or disaster plans, did not adequately seek input from health professionals, or provide them with access to their policy or plans. Forty percent of respondents said their governments did not involve them in policy decisions or in formulating plans about global warming and climate change. As one respondent said, *Health professionals and their associations should be integral to decision making; because they bear the brunt of the health effects and disasters which will arise from global warming and climate change.*



MESSAGE 3: KEEP US INFORMED

Health professionals at all levels want to be kept informed. They understand they will be called on to care for people affected by global warming and climate change, but without information their response will be inadequate. *Consultation occurs, but only with health professionals at a policy or academic level. There is little or no consultation with health professionals in the workplace or in the field.* Health professionals also consider that the public are poorly informed. *Dissemination of information from the top down appears to be a major challenge and is not done well. There should be more public participation in decision making together with more public education.*



MESSAGE 4: THE COST OF INACTION IS GREATER THAN THE COST OF ACTION

Global, collaborative strategies are needed to avoid wholesale environmental devastation and gross social disruption with consequent risks to health and peace. There is a clear choice between continuing unsustainable and inequitable consumption of energy use and collaborative planning to mitigate foreseeable economic, environmental, social and health risks associated with climate change. Health professionals consider the cost of doing nothing, of being reactive, much greater in financial and human terms than taking preventative action.

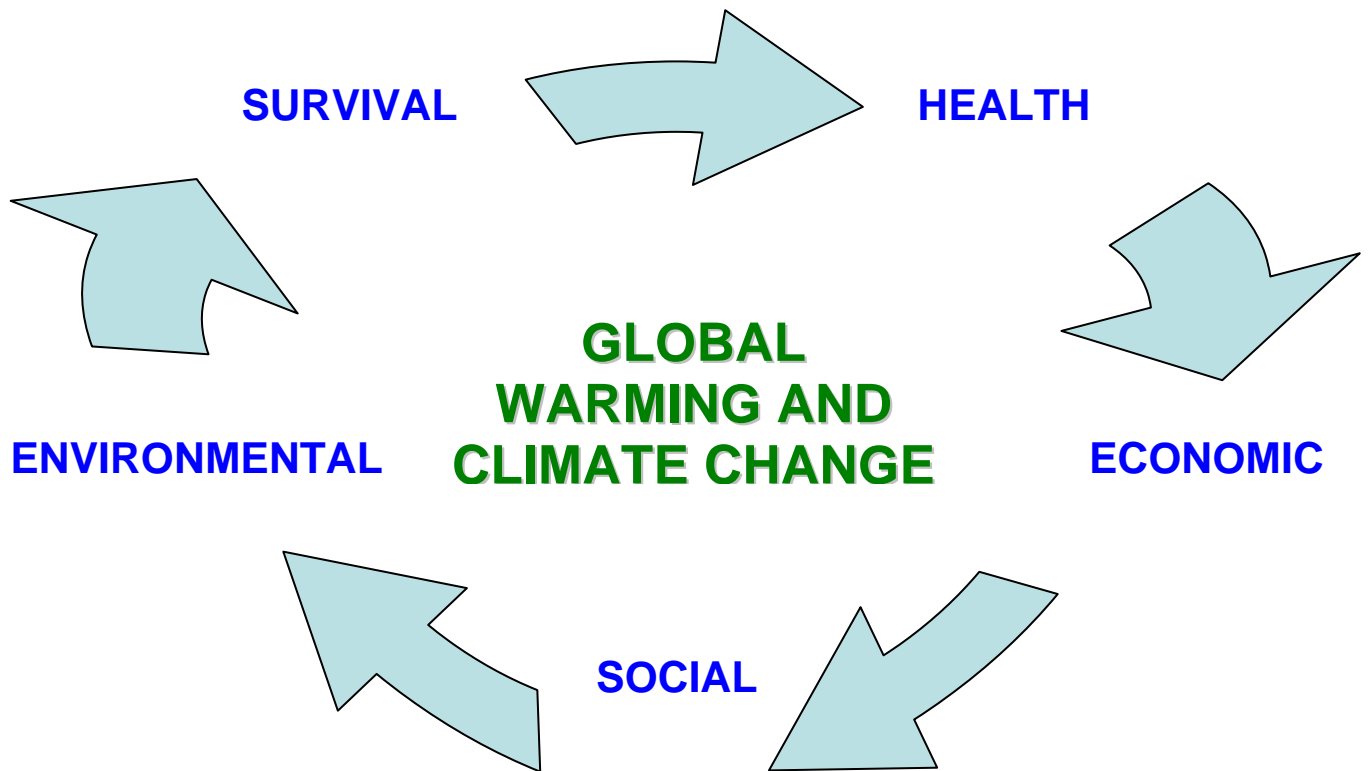


MESSAGE 5: ACT NOW!

Respondents were concerned that governments are too distracted by other issues, such as their own domestic issues (unemployment, crime, and poverty) and the current global economic crisis. *There is very little evidence of any genuine commitment; the issue is not being taken seriously and is not high enough on their agenda.* Health professionals felt the time to act was now and that while individual effort was important, the leadership of national governments together with international collaboration and cooperation was critical to success.

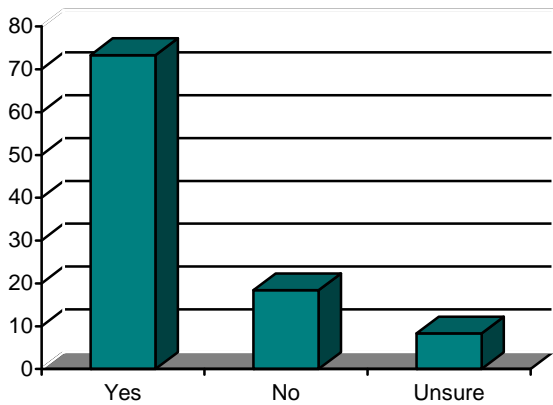
“Our planet is like our bodies. If we place it under too much stress, the system loses equilibrium. The big bang that initiated the world may ultimately end the world. It may be too sudden to anticipate”

There was remarkable consistency in the effects, identified by health professionals, of global warming and climate change. The effects fell into five main categories: survival; health; economic; social; and environmental. Each effect impacted on and was impacted by other effects, forming a relentless cycle of increasing severity.



SURVIVAL	HEALTH	ECONOMIC	SOCIAL	ENVIRONMENT
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ Soil erosion ♣ Deforestation ♣ Desertification ♣ Increase in uninhabitable areas ♣ Saline intrusion into and decreased water tables ♣ Depleted water reservoirs ♣ Reduced supply of fresh water ♣ Effect of drought on agriculture and industry ♣ Reduction in number of animals and sea life ♣ Decrease in arable land ♣ Decrease in agriculture and food production ♣ Reduced food supply ♣ Displacement of farmers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ Increased CO₂ emissions ♣ Increase in UV light ♣ Increased pollution ♣ Increased temperatures leading to increase in infectious organisms and spread of disease ♣ Increase in heat induced illness eg skin problems, dehydration, kidney problems ♣ Increase in respiratory disease ♣ Increase in cancers ♣ Increase in infectious diseases, allergies, and autoimmune diseases ♣ Emergence of new diseases ♣ Increase in mental health disorders ♣ Decreased food supply leading to malnutrition, hunger and starvation ♣ Sanitation issues and difficulties with waste management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ Negative effect on agricultural industry ♣ Negative effect on mining industry ♣ Decrease in exports ♣ Decrease in tourism ♣ Increase in economic refugees ♣ Increase in unemployment ♣ Decrease in energy sources ♣ Decrease in fuel supply ♣ Disruption to trade with effect of unstable weather on communication systems eg road, rail and information technology ♣ Increased cost to restore loss and damage ♣ Increase in cost of production and in cost of goods and services eg food, water and energy ♣ Increased demand on financial resources but fewer resources to meet demand ♣ Economic uncertainty ♣ Economic collapse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ Urbanisation – movement of people away from rural areas to cities ♣ Overpopulation of cities ♣ Infrastructure failure due to overpopulation ♣ Increase in refugees displaced from origins and family support ♣ Housing shortages in cities ♣ Increase in homelessness ♣ Reduced earnings ♣ Increased demand on products and services ♣ Reduction in products and services ♣ Increased cost of products and services ♣ Increase in personal hardship ♣ Increase in poverty ♣ Increase in suicide ♣ Increase in crime ♣ Social disintegration and collapse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ♣ Unpredictable and unstable weather patterns ♣ Increase in natural disasters ♣ Rising sea levels affecting coastal erosion, coastal flooding, loss of coastal habitats and ecosystems, small island states ♣ Rise in sea water temperature affecting coral reefs and marine life ♣ Increase in natural disasters with increased demand on finances, infrastructure and human resources with decreased resources ♣ Displacement of people ♣ Increased damage to ozone layer ♣ Negative effect on wildlife with loss of habitat, reduced water supply, food, unstable weather patterns ♣ Extinction of species

Is global warming and climate change a concern to your government?

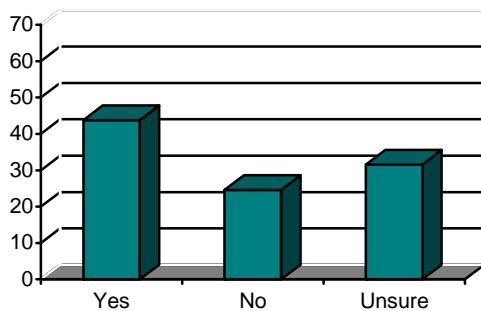


Nearly three quarters of respondents considered that global warming and climate change was a concern for their government. The 18.4% of respondents who did not consider climate change was a concern for their government commented:

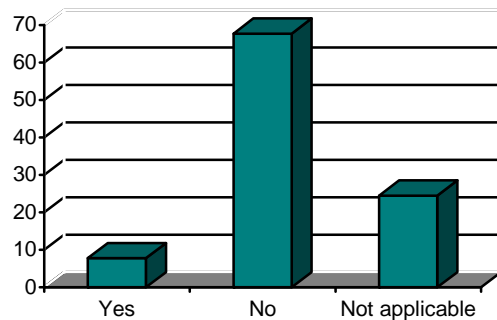
- climate change is a concern but not a priority with a lot of talk but not much action,
- there is crisis management but no forward planning to prevent the crisis in the first place, and
- governments say they have more important priorities such as crime, unemployment and poverty.

Respondents were asked whether their government had an action plan or high level committee on global warming and climate change and whether health professionals had input into or access to that action plan or high level committee.

Does your government have an action plan or high level committee on global warming and climate change?

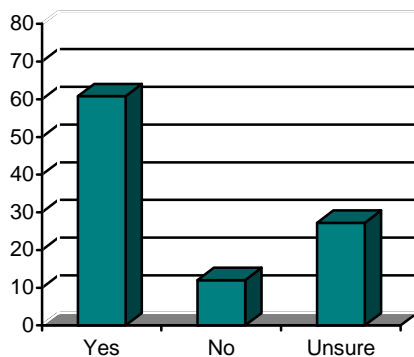


Do health professionals have access to or input into the action plan or high level committee on global warming and climate change?

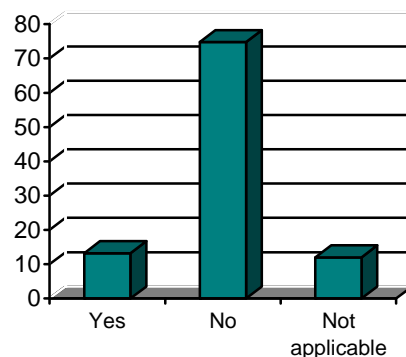


The results are disturbing. While nearly half the respondents acknowledged their government had an action plan or high level committee on global warming and climate change, a quarter said their government did not and nearly a third were unsure. Even more disturbing was the lack of input into or access to the action plans and high level committees by health professionals. Nearly three quarters of respondents said they had no input and no access, yet these are the very people governments will rely on in an emergency or to mitigate any harmful effects of global warming and climate change.

Does your government have a disaster plan?

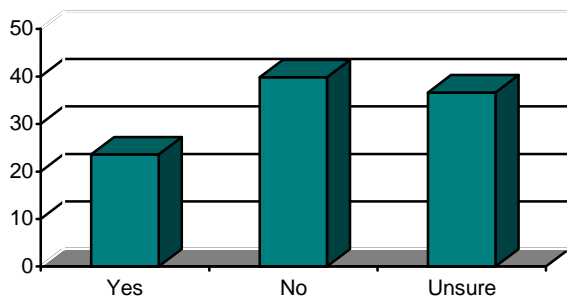


Do health professionals have access to or input into the disaster plan?



Respondents were asked whether their governments had a disaster plan and whether health professionals had input into or access to the disaster plan. The results seem to suggest that, while governments have prepared for disasters (yes = 60.8%), they have not yet adequately responded to the emergent issue of global warming and climate change (yes = 43.8%). And while more disaster plans may be in place than plans for global warming and climate change, the input into or access for health professionals into disaster plans (yes = 13.2%; no = 74.8%) is similar to that of plans for global warming and climate change (yes = 7.8%; no = 67.7%). As one respondent commented: *Our government has good policies but they are not made available to health professionals generally or the public so when there is a disaster the implementation fails.*

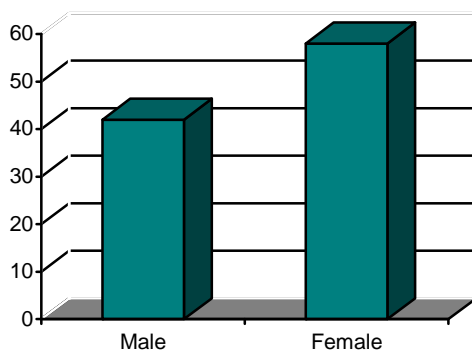
Does your government involve health professionals in decisions about global warming and climate change



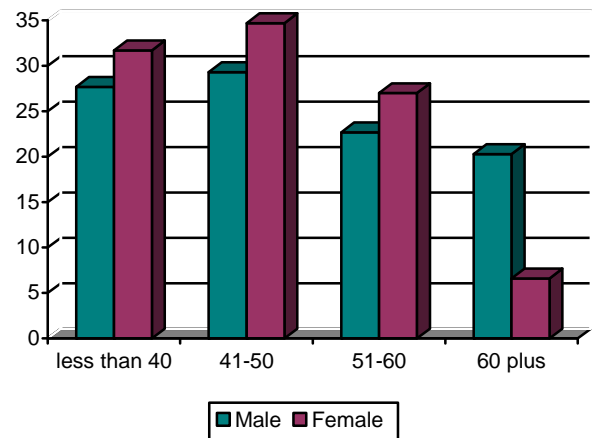
The most disturbing result from the survey was the perception by health professionals that governments do not involve them in decisions about responding to global warming and climate change. The strong message from health professionals is that they want and need to be involved and not just at the administrative, academic or policy levels. If preparation is to be appropriate and plans are to succeed, health professionals at all levels need and want to be involved. When asked whether global warming and climate change was a personal concern for them, 96% of health professionals responded that it was (2.2% were unsure and 1.8% said 'no').

Responses were received from 42 of the 53 Commonwealth countries. There were slightly more female (58%) respondents than male (42%). The majority of respondents were employed and working in the community sector (50.4%), with more pharmacists and dentists working in the community sector than doctors and nurses whose major area of employment was in the hospital sector. The age of respondents fell across all age groups with the majority being below 50 years of age.

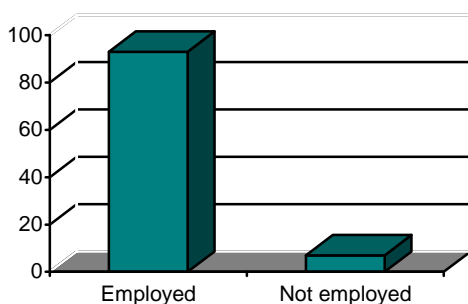
Are you male or female?



What is your age?

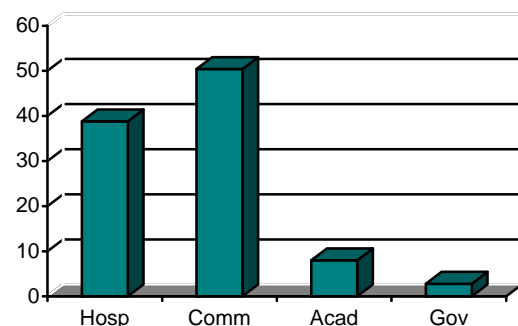


Are you employed?



If employed, where do you work?

H = hospital; C = community; A = academia; G = government



Health professionals care. They want to be involved and be partners with government in addressing global warming and climate change. Commonwealth Health Ministers need to engage with this precious human resource; seek their input and give them information. These are the people Health Ministers will be calling on in an emergency or a disaster. They understand the issues. They are ready and waiting to be called.

“We have only one planet. If we do not save it, we have no where else to go”