

# MEDICAL WARNING: GLOBAL WARMING

**TO: PRESIDENTS CLINTON AND YELTSIN, CHANCELLOR KOHL, and PRIME MINISTERS BLAIR, HASHIMOTO, JOSPIN, CHRÉTIEN, AND PRODI, and other leaders of countries attending the Kyoto Summit.**

As physicians and health professionals, increasingly concerned by the public's lack of awareness of the potential human health consequences from global warming and its associated changes in global climate, we are impelled to issue this medical warning as you prepare for the Climate Change Meetings in Kyoto, Japan.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, made up of more than 2500 of the world's leading scientists, has concluded that human activity may have already begun to change the global climate. And it has predicted that the continued accumulation of greenhouse gases at current rates will, over the next 100 years, warm the planet between 2° and 6° Fahrenheit (1°—3.5° Centigrade), raise the oceans by 6 inches to 3 feet (15 to 90 cm.), and alter weather patterns, so that there will be significantly greater rain and snow and flooding in some areas, and drought in others. The rate and magnitude of these changes, not seen on Earth for more than 130,000 years (when our species *Homo sapiens* first evolved), may severely affect life on land and in the oceans, and will pose enormous, and we believe unacceptable, risks for human health, as detailed in a recent report by the World Health Organization, including:

1. increased illnesses and deaths from heat waves and air pollution, particularly in urban areas, with the elderly, infants, the poor, and those with chronic heart and lung disease the most at risk,
2. increased injuries and deaths from extreme weather events,
3. increased outbreaks and spread of some infectious diseases carried by mosquitoes including viral encephalitis, dengue fever, yellow fever, and malaria,
4. increased outbreaks of some water-borne diseases such as childhood diarrheal diseases and cholera,

This open letter was initiated by physicians from the Center for Health and the Global Environment at Harvard Medical School, the Department of Community Medicine at Mt. Sinai School of Medicine, the Johns Hopkins School of Public Health, the Department of Epidemiology and Population Health at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, the Department of Epidemiology at the University of Ottawa, and the Department of Public Health Sciences at the University of Alberta, and was paid for by the signers, with support from the W. Alton Jones Foundation, the Wallace Global Foundation, the Summit Foundation, and various individuals.

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5. decreased availability of drinking water from the effects of drought, flooding, and rising seas,
6. and perhaps of greatest concern, damaging effects to organisms on land and in the oceans that could compromise food production and alter the functioning of ecosystem services that provide the life support systems for all life on this planet.

We recognize that there are many uncertainties in these predictions, and that some of the health effects listed above may be less serious than expected. But we also understand that the consequences of disrupting the world's climate may be even more severe than we can anticipate, with unforeseen interactive effects that may increase the toll on human health.

As physicians and health professionals, we are trained that when the risks to health and life are great enough, it is necessary to take immediate preventive action to avoid a potential medical catastrophe, even when one does not have all the evidence in hand. We believe this is the situation we face today with the threat of global warming.

With our rapidly increasing use of fossil fuels and release of carbon dioxide, the main greenhouse gas, we are, in effect, conducting a global experiment with ourselves as the experimental subjects, without having given our "informed consent."

Therefore, we urge you, as the leaders of the countries that make the greatest contribution to the world's greenhouse gases:

1. To develop plans that promptly and significantly reduce the emission of these gases,
2. and to meet with a delegation of medical and public health experts, as you prepare for your negotiations in Kyoto, so that we can help inform you of the significant threat to human health and life from global climate change.

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