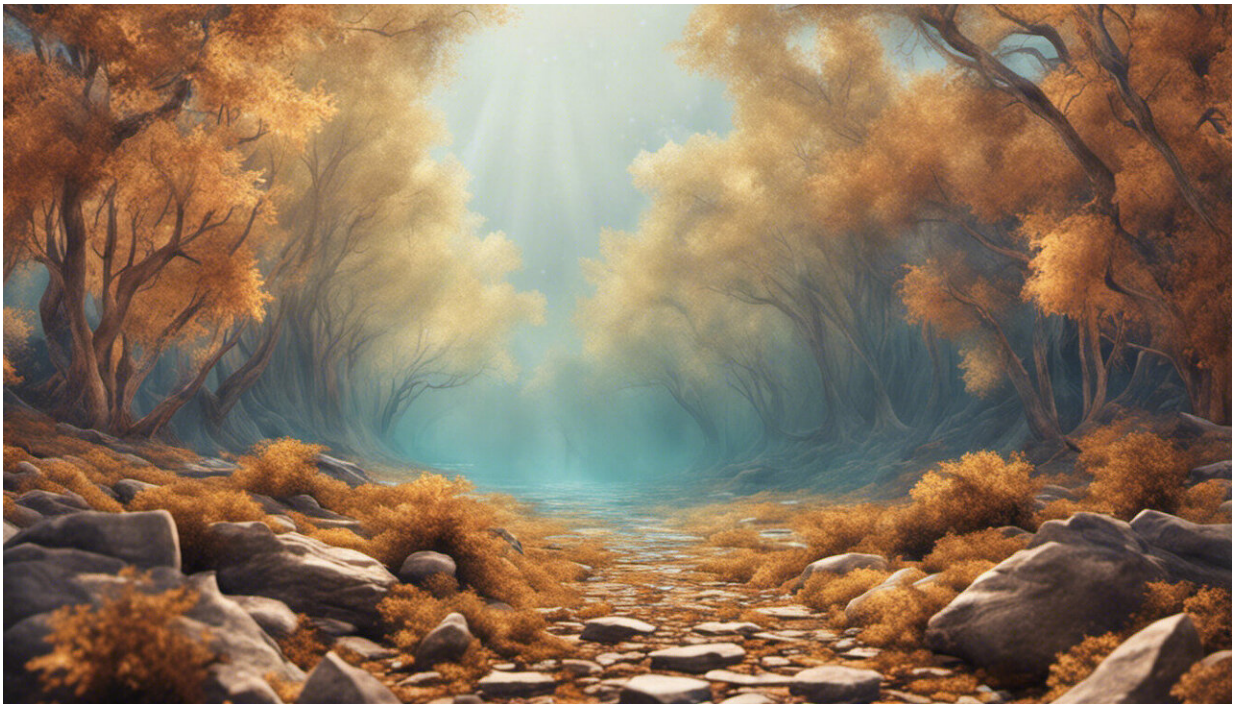


Climate change puts health at risk and economists have the right prescription

June 25 2019, by Christopher Ragan And Courtney Howard



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Doctors and economists may seem like strange partners. We spend our days working on very different problems in very different settings. But climate change has injected a common and urgent vocabulary into our work. We find ourselves agreeing both about the nature of the problem and the best solution. It's [essential that we put a price on carbon pollution](#)

For doctors across Canada, the evidence at the bedside is increasingly hard to ignore: [climate](#) change poses a serious health risk.

Emergency physician Edward Xie has worked in Toronto for over 10 years. Lately, he's seen more patients anxious about [tick bites](#). It's no wonder. A [recent medical study](#) shows a fivefold increase in Lyme disease cases in Ontario between 2012 and 2017 as ticks expand their habitat northward.

Dr. Xie also notices more cases of heat exhaustion and dehydration in summer months—particularly among elderly and low-income individuals who lack adequate housing. In Toronto alone, heat already contributes to an estimated 120 deaths each year. [The city expects](#) that number to grow.

We're paying for climate change with our health

The risks aren't always obvious or intuitive.

In an interview, Dr. Sarah Chapelsky, an Edmonton internist, recalled patients who were hospitalized because they fled the Fort McMurray fires in May 2016 without taking their inhalers or prescriptions. Although it takes time to connect individual events to climate change, there is a [growing body of evidence](#) linking climate change and wildfires.

Fort McMurray's hospital itself was evacuated, demonstrating the threat climate change poses not only to health, but to health systems.

From Lyme disease and heat stroke to heightened risk of premature death, climate change puts the wellbeing of all Canadians at risk. The

symptoms vary, but they share a root cause.

There's more than our health at stake. Economists now view [charged-up wildfires, floods and storms as a new normal](#)—disruptive events that [threaten homes](#), [jobs, businesses](#) and our [continued prosperity](#).

The Fort McMurray wildfires [cost Alberta \\$9 billion](#), about 2.5 percent of provincial GDP. British Columbia's 2018 wildfire season was its worst ever, breaking the record set in 2017. The asthma-aggravating smoke travelled [hundreds of kilometres](#) across the Prairies. Millions of Canadians inhaled poor-quality air [for weeks](#).

Flooding, already Canada's costliest extreme weather event, [is getting worse](#). The recent floods in New Brunswick, Québec and Ontario established [historically high watermarks](#).

A growing consensus

One way or another, we are paying the costs of climate change—in sick days and lost wages, rising health care costs and home insurance rates, and a less stable climate for the next generation. And we're still adding new charges to our bill.

Both professions agree: we must act. [Several Canadian medical organizations](#) issued a call to all federal political parties to act on climate change, urging serious treatment for what the World Health Organization calls "[greatest health threat in the 21st century](#)."

In a new open letter, more than 3,500 economists state that climate change is "[a serious problem](#)" calling for immediate action. The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change research collaborative, which includes doctors and economists, agrees that adequately [pricing](#) carbon could be the [single most important treatment](#) for climate change.

Economics has a very clear prescription for these challenges: carbon pricing. In the same way that penicillin treats an infection, carbon pricing can help fight climate change. It effectively targets the root of the problem and there's a mountain of evidence that it works.

Carbon pricing mobilizes market forces, creating incentives for businesses and individuals alike to seek out low-carbon alternatives. It encourages innovation, creating demand for non-polluting technologies and the industries that supply them. And it provides a clear signal to polluters that [they are imposing costs on others](#).

Following doctor's orders

There is good evidence that carbon pricing will slow climate change. It has reduced carbon emissions in [British Columbia](#), [several U.S. states](#), and across [Europe](#) for more than a decade. It was pivotal in the [United Kingdom](#)'s move away from [coal power](#). A price on pollution was a [vital part](#) of the effort to eliminate acid rain in the 1990s. Like [putting a price on tobacco](#), it encourages a gradual shift towards healthier behaviours.

While [climate change](#) harms vulnerable and low-income Canadians the most, carbon pricing in Canada is designed to immunize them from increased costs. By returning the revenues through household rebates, tax cuts and low-carbon investments like [public transit](#), governments are using the revenues from carbon pricing to make the transition to a cleaner economy more affordable. When designed well, carbon pricing is a progressive policy. Canadian governments have designed their [carbon](#) pricing policies well.

Doctors and economists agree. Climate change is here, it's getting worse, and the best time to do something about it is right now. For healthier families, a healthier economy, and a healthier planet, [carbon pricing](#) is just what the doctor (and the economist) ordered.

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