

New book warns climate change is making us sick

September 21 2017, by Tracie White



Credit: CC0 Public Domain

In 2008, Jay Lemery, MD, an emergency physician in Colorado, read a commentary about the effects of global climate change on human health. The author was Paul Auerbach, MD, professor of emergency medicine at Stanford and one of the world's leading authorities on wilderness medicine.

Published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, the article caught Lemery's attention.

"What I immediately thought was we need to have a physician movement around this," said Lemery, associate professor of [emergency medicine](#) at the University of Colorado and section chief of wilderness and environmental medicine.

Now, a decade later, Lemery has co-authored a book with Auerbach that delves into the growing health issues touched upon in that 2008 article—the countless, frightening ways that climate change is increasing allergens, creating [toxic algal blooms](#), inducing heat stress, causing air degradation, and creating water and food insecurity. The book, *Enviromedics: The Impact of Climate Change on Human Health*, not only calls on physicians, but everyone on the planet, to take note. The book is scheduled to be published in October.

Trying to hasten a 'reasonable response'

"We don't see the world moving fast enough to protect the planet, so perhaps by moving the discussion to [human health](#) we can hasten some sort of reasonable response," Auerbach said. "Hurricanes Harvey and Irma are already causing a considerable health impact, such as floodwaters contaminated with bacteria and toxins, drowning deaths, disruption of essential medical care and even floating fire ant colonies."

Lemery said, "On the hottest day of the year, patients come to the ER with heart attacks, COPD [chronic [obstructive pulmonary disease](#)] exacerbations and diabetes complications. If you do what we do, it's not that hard to see the link between global warming and human illness."

The book lays out in disturbing detail how human afflictions are proliferating due to manmade environmental change, and it's likely to only get worse. More intense heat waves are killing the sick and the elderly; increasing air degradation sends asthma sufferers into serious and sometimes deadly attacks; hotter temperatures are spreading

mosquito-borne diseases. The authors warn that if nothing is done to curtail climate change, it will do much more than cause the extinction of polar bears: It may threaten humanity. By bringing together the many risks to human health in one book, the authors hope to propel people into action.

"People may have heard scattered comments about [global climate change](#), but I don't think they've looked at the issue as an aggregate whole," Auerbach said. "It's time for everyone to realize that it could conceivably become now or never on this issue because there soon may be much more environmental chaos and human suffering."

No one is immune

The book is grounded in the overwhelming scientific evidence of [global warming](#). To write it, the authors conducted extensive research, as well as called upon their firsthand experiences with cases linked to [climate change](#). The following are a few examples from the book that illustrate how no one is immune from the health effects of the phenomenon:

- A warmer world with greater weather extremes and increased atmospheric turbulence that degrades air quality will affect more people and increase the severity and number of asthma attacks. The book uses the fictional story of Sandra, a young woman with asthma in the South Bronx, who almost dies during a heat wave as temperatures soar toward 110 degrees.
- Extreme weather causes more severe storms and flooding, magnifying the ubiquitous problem of sewage overflow. The lack of access to clean water has been linked to outbreaks of such illnesses as cholera, hepatitis A, ringworm and scabies. The book introduces us to Andrew, a fictional character who starts itching violently after wading in a polluted river near his home. The doctor diagnoses what is now a common household disorder

contracted from dirty water: scabies. The minuscule human scabies mite completes its entire life cycle on the skin of humans and, untreated, might live there for years.

- The book enumerates the ways in which drought can force people to abandon safe practices and use whatever resources are available. In Tanzania and Mozambique, drought conditions were associated with outbreaks of konzo, a devastating neurological disease that causes irreversible paralysis. A report from Brazil in 1996 cited more than 50 deaths from liver failure when local cyanotoxin-contaminated water was unknowingly used for kidney dialysis.

The two physicians have treated patients with most of the illnesses and conditions described in the book. Global warming, as far as they know, is not causing new disorders, but rather spreading them and making them worse. "This is an inventory of what happens when our environment goes haywire, and all the checks and balances of an ecosystem are gone," Lemery said. "We should all pause. We should all worry."

Provided by Stanford University Medical Center

Citation: New book warns climate change is making us sick (2017, September 21) retrieved 22 September 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-09-climate-sick.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.