Advocates aim to help nurses be the first medical responders to confront climate change

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Whether it's scorching heat, flooding, drought or disease outbreaks, the health sector is often the most deeply immersed in the fallout from a climate-driven event.

Policymakers have the time to go back and forth over the potential merits of a carbon tax or incentives for clean technology to avert the worst-case climate scenario, but nurses, doctors and public health officials in the United States are already confronting emergency rooms filling with patients suffering from heatstroke, injuries and infections wrought by rising temperatures.

Heat waves may be the most potent threat. The sweltering temperature surges are the deadliest weather phenomenon, killing more people annually than storms, earthquakes and floods combined, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (ClimateWire, June 7). These events are poised to become more frequent and dangerous in the future.

"When we think about climate change, what we really focus on are the health impacts. The health impacts are going to be devastating," said Eric Lerner, climate director for Health Care Without Harm, a nonprofit aimed at reducing the environmental footprint of medical practices.

The group recently put out a call for proposals from nurses to address the health impacts of climate change. The winning idea, to be announced in January, will receive a $10,000 grant to put it in action.

"We think nurses are, at this point in time, in need of greater support, especially when it comes to funding," Lerner said.

Nurses are often the first point of contact for illness and injury, so when a tornado passes through or when a swell of infected mosquitoes comes biting, nurses are among the first to know and the first to respond.

"Nurses are trained holistically," explained Mary Margaret Thomas, a registered nurse and a co-chairwoman of the nursing working group at Health Care Without Harm. "We have to really
emphasize holistic care and creating care plans that includes the patient's environment, family and support systems."

**A need to exchange regional strategies**

As such, nurses hold a unique position to devise tactics for the looming onslaught of climate-related health problems, but also to lead the counteroffensive by educating patients in how to adapt to a new normal.

"Nurses have a natural leadership role in the hospital setting and also a public role," said Kelli Barber, a nurse who leads the working group with Thomas.

Many climate challenges intersect in the medical sector. Hospitals are huge energy users and lead to more greenhouse gas emissions than standard offices due to on-site generation, leaking anesthetic gases and power-hungry hardware like X-ray machines. Extreme weather puts massive stress on medical infrastructure, and as patients come in, resources quickly dry up (*ClimateWire*, Aug. 12).

Though the problem is global, climate change creates different challenges in different locales, whether it's dust, flooding or heat. With the grant competition, advocates hope nurses can learn new strategies from one another to curb health problems and reduce their environmental impact rather than reinventing the wheel to handle unique regional impacts.

"Nurses out there [dealing with climate change] are basically lone wolves," Barber said, noting that nurses are one of the largest segments of health care professionals. "The reason we do this is to raise the voices of those lone wolves."

Shaping public understanding is also a critical component of handling changes in weather patterns for nurses. "Climate health preparedness is vastly underappreciated as an urgent priority," said Kim Knowlton, a senior scientist at the Natural Resources Defense Council. "It needs more resources, and that means more funding to get that information out there into the public health sector and clinical sector."

She added, "I think nurses are incredibly important in terms of getting the messages out on the health effects of climate change and connecting the dots on the health effects."