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Health Professionals from around the world calling for G7 leaders to phase-out coal

Submitted by Kim Perrotta and Ian Culbert
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When the leaders of the G7 nations, including Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, meet on May 26 and 27th in Japan, they will be discussing major health issues such as maternal health and universal health coverage. During those discussions, they also need to talk about coal-fired power plants that are used to generate electricity.

Why are coal plants a health issue? Because, on a global scale, they are one of the most significant sources of emissions that contribute to climate change; which has been declared to be “the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century” by the World Health Organization (WHO). Climate change affects so many of the elements that are necessary for life and health; the stability of our weather, the quality of our air, the security and safety of our food and water supplies, and the security of our housing, transportation and power systems.

Researchers tell us that climate change is already claiming thousands of lives each year with heat waves, floods, hunger and infectious diseases. This is particularly true for the elderly who are vulnerable to heat and for children who are living in developing countries. The WHO estimates that climate change will produce an additional 250,000 deaths each year by 2030 unless dramatic action is taken to slow climate change.

Many see the closure of coal-fired power plants, which are responsible for up to 43 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions globally, as the fastest way to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. That is because coal is such a rich source of carbon dioxide, but also because there are alternative technologies that can be used to displace and replace coal-fired power plants. Renewable energies are ready to pick up the mantle. The world is now investing more money in renewable energies than in fossil fuels and new technologies are becoming increasingly affordable. In many jurisdictions, wind-

generated electricity now costs the same or less than natural gas and coal, and solar energy is rapidly catching up.

The good news is that the phase-out of coal plants will also produce significant and immediate health benefits and health care savings for the countries that close them because they are also one of the most significant sources of air pollution. Coal-fired power plants emit large volumes of sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides, and fine particulate matter; air pollutants that have been directly linked with acute and chronic heart and lung diseases and ailments.

On a global scale, outdoor air pollution is responsible for approximately 3.7 million premature deaths each year. Coal-fired power plants are responsible for a significant share of these health impacts. For example, in the United States alone, air pollution from coal plants is linked to approximately 13,200 premature deaths, 9,700 hospital admissions, and 20,000 heart attacks every year. In Ontario, which closed six coal-fired power plants between 2003 and 2014, the avoided health impacts have been valued at approximately \$3 billion per year.

For these reasons, more than 300,000 doctors, nurses, public health professionals and public health advocates represented by 82 organizations in 30 countries are calling on our leaders to integrate the phase-out of coal plants into their talks on the health agenda at the G7 Meeting in Japan with a Global Health Statement on Coal Plants. Among those organizations are the Canadian Public Health Association (CPHA), the Registered Nurses' Association of Ontario (RNAO), the Heart and Stroke Foundation of Canada, the Canadian Lung Association and the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE).

Responding to climate change is the challenge of our generation. The business-as-usual projections will irrevocably increase temperatures and sea levels well above safe levels by 2050-2100. Handing over such a situation to the next generation would be as unforgivable as it is unnecessary. The implications of climate change impact every corner of the G7 agenda. The prescription of the world's health professionals is to start by phasing out coal.

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