Emphasizing the Link Between Human Health and the Environment in Residency Education

To the Editor: Philipsborn and colleagues' recently proposed a new framework for integrating evidence-based content on climate change into residency education. These authors have started an important conversation. We argue, however, that medical educators must also explicitly guide residents to challenge what defines human health and the role of the health care system, especially in the context of climate justice. The time has come for medical professionals to acknowledge human health's dependency upon a healthy natural world, which includes clean air and water, green space, and intact ecosystems, in addition to a stable climate. If we fail to expand the purview of medicine to include a healthy environment, we will be woefully unable to meet the needs of our patients and, in particular, to address systemic environmental injustices that disproportionately affect communities of color.

Revising residency education becomes even more compelling once we acknowledge the interdependence of human health and the environment because this would allow us to offer more actionable interventions to residents. Many of Philipsborn and colleagues' proposed learning objectives imply that residents have little ability to influence change from within the patient–doctor relationship. Instead, they are relegated to passive roles of explaining the shifting risks of climate change to their vulnerable patient populations. A broader definition of human health, however, encourages physicians to leverage creative treatments and innovative preventive medicine. What are framed as “climate mitigation activities” briefly touched upon in the residency curriculum can be formalized into patient-centered “prescriptions,” such as green space to treat attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder symptoms and active transport to increase physical activity.

Expanding the definition of human health in residency education and all other areas of medicine to include the environment is critical and long overdue. As physician educators, we have an obligation to prepare the next generation of physicians to provide care that positively impacts the health of both the patient and the planet.

Funding/Support: None reported.

Other disclosures: None reported.

Ethical approval: Reported as not applicable.

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References