



## **EHFG 2012: Strategies to combat climate change have direct public health benefits**

*Fewer people suffering cardio-vascular diseases, some cancers and respiratory ailments: efforts to mitigate climate change are not only essential for the environment but also have important benefits for public health and health care costs, Prof Andy Haines told the European Health Forum Gastein. He calls for interdisciplinary and international collaboration to make the most of co-benefits of policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.*

**Bad Hofgastein, 4 October 2012** – Climate change without any doubt also presents huge and unavoidable challenges to health systems. But the urgent need to combat climate change also offers many opportunities to deliver improvements in health and reductions in health-care costs, sometimes with discernible effects in the near term. These benefits have been ignored by governments for too long,“ Sir Andy Haines, Professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, told the European Health Forum Gastein (EHFG).

As part of the „Task Force on Climate Change Mitigation and Public Health“, Prof Haines and colleagues around the world have demonstrated in a series of studies the ways in which many strategies to reduce greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions can lead to significant co-benefits for health. Their investigations focused on estimating the magnitude of effects on health of regional and national programs to reduce GHG emissions, assuming systematic implementation. Policies in four sectors - transport, electricity generation, household energy (heating and cooking) and food and agriculture were examined.

The European Commission has also referred to the direct and indirect consequences of climate change: direct consequences include those attributable to extreme temperatures. The heat wave of the summer of 2003 is estimated to have caused over 70,000 additional deaths. Among EU member states, heat related mortality is estimated to rise by between 1% and 4% with each increase of one degree in temperatures, meaning heat related mortality could lead to 30,000 deaths a year by 2030, rising to between 50,000 and 110,000 deaths annually by 2080.

### **Reduced car use can improve health and lower GHG emissions**

Cutting private car use in urban areas and implementing measures to encourage cycling and walking would be beneficial not only for the climate but also for the health of urban dwellers. Reducing air pollution from fossil fuel combustion would cut lung cancer and the incidence of some respiratory ailments. Encouraging regular physical activity would also bring benefits in combating many conditions that are related to sedentary lifestyle. For example in London policies including the replacement of some car journeys by doubling the distance walked and increasing the distance cycled 8 fold (from a low baseline) would bring about a reduction of nearly two-fifths in CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, and is estimated to cut risk of cardio-vascular diseases and strokes by between 10 and around 20%, prevent 12 to 13% of breast cancers and reduce dementia cases by around 8%, and depression rates by about 5%,“ said Prof Haines. Such policies can also substantially reduce costs to health services of dealing with chronic diseases, including diabetes.

Increased physical activity could also contribute to addressing the widespread problem of overweight and obesity. If no counter-measures are taken, the Foresight report suggests for instance that, by 2050, in Britain 60% of adult men, 50% of adult women, and about 25% of all children younger than 16 years could be obese.

The benefits to health would greatly exceed the probable increase in traffic related injuries but it will be important to put in place policies to acceptability, appeal and safety of walking in cycling in order to encourage mass participation in walking and cycling. „It is difficult to achieve active, healthy and environmentally friendly mobility without surroundings in which one can safely do so,“ Prof Haines said. Local transport policies are required to create the appropriate conditions.

### **Heating and cooking without indoor pollution**

Strategies to combat climate change are of varying significance in different parts of the world. For example, the co-benefits for health from reduction of greenhouse pollutant emissions in the area of domestic heating and cooking are significantly lower in Europe than in India although still significant. In south Asia, China and much of sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America open fires or inefficient stoves are still common for domestic heating and cooking - with attendant smoke and indoor air pollutants - causing an estimated 2 million premature deaths per year. Some of these pollutants, such as black carbon, also contribute to climate change. Improvements can prevent many cases of indoor pollutant-related respiratory infections in children, together with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and ischaemic heart disease in adults, and save millions of people from early death. India has already started a programme to provide its people with cheap and clean-burning cookstoves. A stove costs only around 50 dollars, a relatively cost-effective prevention measure,“ said Prof Haines.

### **Electricity generation without fossil fuels**

Electricity generation from burning fossil fuels, particularly lignite and coal, also results in fine particulate air pollution. The co-benefits for health in Europe are less than in India or China, since electricity generation in Europe is subject to fairly effective pollution controls. However further reductions in the use of fossil fuels for electricity generation by 2030, would translate in the EU into an extra 100 so-called DALYs (disability adjusted life years, a measure combining mortality and the adverse effects of illness on a normal lifespan) per million inhabitants - with corresponding savings for health-care systems. A range of renewable and other technologies could result in lower fine particulate emissions.

### **Food and agriculture: reducing meat consumption is beneficial for the climate and the heart**

A change in diet, for example cutting out every third hamburger, would be beneficial for the climate and the heart, Prof Haines told the EHFG. „A 30% reduction in consumption of saturated fatty acids of animal origin would lead to an around 15% drop in cardio-vascular disease in Great Britain. We can assume the effect would be similar in other European countries“. This is a clear co-benefit beyond the positive effect of reduced meat consumption for climate change of clearing less forest for pasture and the cultivation of animal feed, a worldwide reduction in meat transport and fewer animals producing harmful methane gas.

### **Cost-savings from health co-benefits can help offset the costs of climate protection strategies**

Not all climate protection strategies are automatically beneficial for public health. A cost benefit analysis needs to be carried out for each mitigation action taking into account the numerous different factors, said Prof Haines. „But discussion of the choice and prioritisation



of climate change mitigation strategies and their costs should take into account the co-benefits to health. The health gains achieved can offset part - in some cases all – of the costs of mitigation measures“. It is precisely the high costs assumed for environmentally friendly technologies and processes which often hinder their implementation and thus positive developments. Taking into consideration the co-benefits of mitigation strategies for public health could provide added incentives for policy makers to implement climate protection measures. Thus Prof Haines has called for „the interdisciplinary cooperation of those health professionals, policy makers and scientists concerned with the effects of climate change to be strengthened. Collaboration must take place at both the global and national levels, in order to confront the threat of climate change.”

The EHFG is the most important conference on health care policy in the European Union. In this its 15<sup>th</sup> year, the EHFG attracts more than 600 decision-makers from 45 countries to discuss major topics on the future of the European health care system from 3 to 6 October 2012.

Please find photos of the European Health Forum Gastein using this link:  
<http://www.ehfg.org/940.html>.

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