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Editorial

The Heat Is on Public Health

Colin Binns, MBBS, PhD and Wah Yun Low, PhD

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Public Health has been at the forefront of raising public health issues emerging in our region. In 2011, the journal published a supplement devoted to the issue of climate change and public health. Events that were predicted to occur at some time in the future appear to be coming sooner than expected. The world has just experienced its hottest decade ever, and Australia has just sweltered under its hottest summer. During this period in Australia, the short-term health effects were evident with an increase in heat-related illnesses. These prolonged periods of higher temperatures have an effect on human health, animals, ecosystems, and agriculture, including food production. Heat kills more Australians than any other extreme weather event.

This month marks the beginning of the northern summer, and we are waiting to see if the Asia-Pacific region also experiences record temperatures. The public health implications of climate change are immense and wide reaching and have recently been confirmed in an international report. As the earth gets hotter, parts of our region will become wetter while other regions will become dryer. The public health impacts have previously been discussed in our supplements on climate change and disaster management. In recent years, our region has made good progress in overcoming chronic hunger and undernutrition, despite the increasing population. But we still have a severe problem in the Asia and Pacific regions (WHO WPRO and SEARO) where an estimated 900 million people still live in extreme poverty. Also, approximately half a billion suffer from hunger, 1 in every 6 persons in the region suffers from malnutrition, and about 1 in 3 children are underweight. Our region is faced with having to overcome these problems while facing a potential decline in food production from the direct effects of climate change and from the severe weather events that are likely to increase in severity and frequency.

Among other concerns about the impact of climate change is the distribution and severity of infectious diseases. In the past few years, Southeast Asia has been in the grip of a dengue fever pandemic, one of the infectious diseases that is likely to increase as the climate warms due to the change in the distribution of the mosquito vectors. The World Health Organization estimates that before 1970, only 9 countries had experienced severe dengue epidemics, but now the disease is endemic in more than 100 countries, including Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. Over 2.5 billion people, more than 40% of the world’s population, are now at risk from dengue. The World Health Organization currently estimates that there may be 50 to 100 million dengue infections worldwide every year.

This issue of the journal includes an article on the “spatial dynamics of dengue fever in Guangzhou,” which shows the value of modern geographic information systems in understanding epidemics of dengue fever. It is tools like this that will become increasingly important for epidemiologists mapping the effects of climate change on the distribution of infectious diseases. Your journal will continue to monitor these trends.

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References


