Clinical Advocacy in Environmental Health

F Bay Area PSR members have long been recognized as trusted experts on health-related issues, not only where we work, but in the community at large. At the core of our educational efforts, we are increasingly encouraging our clinical colleagues to take a leading role in protecting public and environmental health. Through a variety of avenues that encourage strong advocacy for our patients and communities, these opportunities include serving in local and state government, participating on hospital sustainability committees, effective media outreach, and tapping into our professional networks and associations to promote effective public policy.

The Climate and Health Literacy Consortium and Food Matters are two examples of our clinical education and advocacy programs. Both of these nationwide efforts are partnerships between SF Bay Area PSR and Health Care Without Harm (HCWH), and include additional partners as well. HCWH, an international coalition of over 450 organizations, works to improve the environmental health and safety of the health care industry, primarily by changing the way hospitals and health systems operate. Our Climate and Food projects integrate the strengths of both organizations—to work with health system administrators to improve sustainability within the industry and to educate and motivate fellow clinicians as advocates on environmental health issues.

Climate and Health Literacy Consortium

As we face the consequences of climate change, it is crucial for the health sector to develop an educated, effective voice on preventing and mitigating the worst impacts. The Climate and Health Literacy Consortium is working to educate clinicians about these issues and to give them the tools to communicate on three different levels: 1) with their patients and families in the clinic, about the health impacts of climate change and personal strategies that individuals can incorporate to help reduce their own climate “footprint;” 2) within their own health care facilities and health systems to promote mitigation strategies that can cut down energy use in operations; and 3) on a local, regional and national level advancing health-protective climate legislation. Since the Consortium was established in 2010, over 800 health professionals have participated in workshops and seminars across the country.

In an article recently published in the New York Times (Doctors Prepare Their Professions to Explain and Treat Climate-Related Symptoms, Published: June 15, 2011), the Consortium was recognized for providing educational resources and tools for clinicians to communicate more broadly and effectively about the health effects of climate change.

As a recent example, in the upcoming August issue of American Family Physician, Dr. Cindy Parker of Johns Hopkins University and PSR presents the latest science on climate change, and connects this to the importance of talking to our patients about food choices that improve personal health while mitigating the impacts of global warming. SF Bay Area PSR’s President Dr. Robert Gould contributes an accompanying editorial about the educational and advocacy efforts of HCWH, PSR, Practice Green Health (PGH), public health and medical associations around the intersection of climate change, health, and nutrition.

Food Matters

All of these foregoing activities underscore the importance for health care systems and providers alike to embrace primary prevention strategies that promote healthy environments and behaviors. This would contribute greatly to reducing the burden of acute illness and chronic disease that is increasingly understood as being strongly linked to in-utero and early childhood exposures to pervasive environmental toxicants that have lifelong impacts.

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WITHDRAWING TROOPS FROM AFGHANISTAN

The Influence of National and Local PSR

SF Bay Area PSR was proud to work with National PSR in its partnership with the Council for a Livable World (CLW), who delivered a petition signed by more than 12,000 people urging significant troop withdrawal from Afghanistan beginning in July. These efforts were part of increasing pressure on President Obama to take action, and on June 22nd, he announced plans to bring home 33,000 troops from Afghanistan by the end of September 2012.

Local efforts mirrored the national political climate, with the City of Richmond passing a resolution in May, brought by SF Bay Area Steering Committee member and Richmond City Council Member Dr. Jeffrey Ritterman, supporting the Congressional Progressive Caucus’s People’s Budget. The People’s Budget would bring U.S. troops home from the wars in both Iraq and Afghanistan and eliminate the deficit. It is designed in response to public polling: it is a budget that would protect Social Security, Medicare, and Medicaid; make higher education more affordable; expand job-training programs; cut taxes on the middle class; subsidize affordable housing; provide financial assistance to prevent foreclosures; raise taxes on millionaires and billionaires; eliminate unnecessary weapons systems; eliminate tax credits for the oil and gas industries; phase out the Bush tax cuts; and eliminate subsidies for new nuclear power plants. The Richmond resolution also assures a Town Hall Meeting to explain the People’s Budget to city residents.

Clinical Advocacy ...

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The Food Matters clinical education and advocacy program leverages the powerful voice of the healthcare sector to educate and activate families, new mothers, and young children around healthy and sustainable foods. The program enables clinicians to instill a new culture and value system within the hospital and medical community such that nutritious, sustainable foods are recognized as integral to a lifelong preventive health agenda.

Since 2010, we have completed three pilot clinical trainings, with three additional trainings coming up. We are distributing 8,000 Food Matters calendars to clinicians all over the country; working with Kaiser and the American Medical Association to organize a national webinar series with the Food Matters curriculum; and completing a Grand Round series at Children’s Hospital in Oakland using the curriculum.

The Climate and Health Literacy Consortium and Food Matters programs thus exemplify the exciting work that SF Bay Area PSR is undertaking to educate and motivate our health professionals to become advocates for a healthier environment. For more information or to get involved in these programs, please contact Lucia Sayre, Co-Executive Director of SF Bay Area PSR at 510-559-8777.