

BC nurses celebrate and support BC's first deputy PHO for planetary and water health

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Recent years have given us a glimpse into the ways in which climate emergencies and changes in planetary health have an enormous impact on our ecosystems and on human health. Heat domes, floods, landslides and wildfires; there is not a corner of the province that has remained free from this impact. Research is clear, global warming and planetary changes have unequivocally led to an increase in average temperatures, atmospheric water vapour, ocean temperature increases, the melting of land ice including permafrost land mass, and rising ocean levels. According to the World Health Organizationⁱ, climate change is the "single biggest health threat facing humanity."

In an historic move earlier this month, the BC Ministry of Health Office of the Provincial Health Officer (OPHO) announced the hire of Dr. Shannon Waters as the first-ever deputy PHO of planetary and water health.ⁱⁱ BC nurses celebrate the addition of Dr. Waters to the OPHO and this immense step toward further supporting population health and wellness impacted by climate change.

The Association of Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC), the professional association for all four nursing designations in BC (licensed practical nurses, nurse practitioners, registered nurses, and registered psychiatric nurses) together with the Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment (CANE) BC, appreciate and applaud Dr. Waters' appointment. We recognize the vital importance of this new leadership position within the Office of the Provincial Health Officer to bring informed guidance to the future direction and decision-making of our provincial health body. As the largest group of health providers in BC and around the world, nurses are acutely aware of the impacts of environmental health on human health and social needs.

Presently more than 90% of global population breathe unhealthy levels of pollutionⁱⁱⁱ, meanwhile entire communities are harmed by climate events such as heat domes and extreme rainfall, and others are displaced and face food and housing insecurity because of wildfires, floods, and droughts. Poor and declining water quality and quantity lead to dehydration and an increase in disease transmission; extreme heat can cause heat stress and stroke and aggravate heart, lung and kidney conditions; wildfires cause air pollution and physical burns, lead to cardiorespiratory problems, chronic breathing issues, and increase risk of death; and floods and extreme rainfall increase the spread of disease, hypothermia, increase risk of drowning, and dismantle physical infrastructure preventing access to health care. All this not only impacts our physical health, but also our mental health.

In BC, more than 600 individuals lost their lives during the 2021 heat dome. Later that year, the atmospheric river in the Sumas Valley also caused significant damage to infrastructure, destroying farmland and paralyzing our health care system. The traumatic loss due to these climate emergencies was profound.

It is also important to note that climate change disproportionately affects rural and remote areas and Indigenous communities. Sadly, in BC many Indigenous communities already do not have adequate access to clean water, and the effects of climate change further exacerbate drought and food insecurity. Despite "urgent action to combat climate change" being one of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (#13)^{iv}, the delay in any meaningful action at systemic levels degrade work toward these health goals. Indigenous health knowledge centres on our relationships with the land and life around us and traditional ways teach us that caring for our environment and caring for our communities are connected.

As forefront leaders in establishing planetary health as a concept interrelated with human health, and one which requires global attention^v, nursing professionals have been highlighting the connection between planetary and human health for decades and have witnessed firsthand the implications of climate emergencies on population health. Nurses are at the forefront of care, education and research, and help people displaced by extreme climate events while also working with populations to mitigate the health issues that arise as a result. Because nursing meets people "where they are," and do so without judgement or question nursing is prepared to provide care in scenarios that we have yet to see or experience.

With the addition of Dr. Waters to OPHO, guided by her expertise as an Indigenous health professional and member of Stz'uminus First Nation, with an acute understanding of the importance of ecosystem health, NNPBC and CANE-BC look forward to working with and implementing Dr. Waters' vision for planetary health. Indigenous health knowledge centres on our relationships with the land and life around us. Indigenous traditional ways teach us that caring for our environment and caring for our communities are connected. Bringing together Indigenous health knowledge with the

unique nursing perspective will help to prepare our system to refocus on both climate health and human health as a singular need.

BC's nursing professionals look forward to working with Dr. Waters and are eager to collaborate with communities and providers to centre our health care efforts in ways that are positive for human and planetary health.

The Association of Nurses and Nurse Practitioners of British Columbia (NNPBC) is the professional association representing all four nursing designations in BC (LPN, NP, RN, RPN) which supports and promotes excellence in nursing practice, education, research, and leadership. The [Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment \(CANE\)](#) is a part of the Canadian Nurses Association's Network of Nursing Specialties, representing Canadian nurses who are dedicated to improving the health of people and planetary health.

NNPBC thanks Helen Boyd, RN, BScN, MA from CANE-BC for her work on this statement.

ⁱ WHO (2023). Climate change. <https://www.who.int/en/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>.

ⁱⁱ Office of the Provincial Health Officer, BC Ministry of Health (2024). Shannon Waters is B.C.'s first-ever deputy PHO for planetary and water health.

ⁱⁱⁱ WHO (2024). Fast facts on climate and health. https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/climate-change/fast-facts-on-climate-and-health.pdf?sfvrsn=157ecd81_5.

^{iv} United Nations (n.d.). Sustainable Development Goals: 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal13/>.

^v Astle, B. (2021). Planetary Health in Nursing: A Transdisciplinary Equity-Centered Approach. *Creative nursing* 27(4). Doi: 10.1891/cn-2021-0027.