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Climate change and rising energy costs: A threat but also an opportunity for a healthier future?

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Summary
Health problems caused by overconsumption, growing inequalities and diminished well-being are issues that have been attributed to the prioritization of economic growth as the central purpose of society. It is also known that climate change and rising energy prices will inevitably bring changes to the globe’s economic models. Doctors and the wider public health community have campaigned successfully in the past on issues such as the threat of nuclear war. Is it now time for this constituency to make its distinctive contribution to these new threats to health?

Economic growth as a historical driver of health improvement

In the early stages of industrialization, economic growth and health have grown in parallel. Greater wealth leads to better health, but improved health also contributes to economic growth.\textsuperscript{1} Various mechanisms have been proposed for this association, including better nutrition as a result of the agricultural revolution,\textsuperscript{2} improved sanitation and public infrastructure,\textsuperscript{3} and the creation of welfare systems and local government.\textsuperscript{4} This historical association is strengthened by evidence from occasions where economic growth has faltered (1970s de-industrialization in parts of Europe\textsuperscript{5} and the economic collapse of the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s\textsuperscript{6}), which shows that economic collapse can have a marked impact on health.

This paper argues that the association between increasing wealth and health remains partially true for poorer countries, but that further growth will not yield health gains for industrialized economies such as the UK. Therefore, a fundamental re-examination of the contribution of economic growth to health is urgently required.

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What is driving current concerns about economic growth?

There is concern about economic growth for two reasons. First, economic growth associated with rising consumerism, individualism and economism damages our sense of well-being and the cohesion of our society. Second, economic growth is not sustainable in a finite planet that is showing the detrimental impact of exponential growth in the consumption of energy and resources. The question is, are these concerns justified, and what is the most appropriate response?

Ideally, a public health response should be based on strong evidence; however, the dilemma of the sigmoid curve proposed by Handy suggests that waiting for the accumulation of evidence before taking action may be too late (Position B on Fig. 1), as decline is already established and a change in direction becomes increasingly difficult. The best time for action is Position A, where resources are still growing and are available to grow a new and sustainable curve.

The incomplete evidence base which suggests that we are at Position A and should take action now is framed in four areas: well-being; overconsumption; inequalities; and, most importantly, sustainability.

Well-being

Since the mid-1970s, increased economic growth in the USA, Europe and Australasia has not been accompanied by commensurate improvement in well-being. Despite the difficulties in defining, measuring and providing its historical trends, it has become clear that well-being has not improved substantially in the developed world for at least 25 years, and may even be declining.

Inequalities

Inequalities in both the determinants and outcomes of health have always been present in society, but have grown during recent decades in developed countries, and now appear to be accelerating (Fig. 2). Whilst there remains debate about the mechanisms through which inequalities limit health, three facets of this argument are difficult to refute. First, income inequality drives health inequality. Second, income and health inequalities have increased during the long recent growth trends of gross domestic product. Third, continued economic growth using the current model is likely to lead to further growth in inequalities of both wealth and health.
The article quoted above appeared in the same week that the number of obese and overweight people in the world overtook the numbers who are malnourished and underweight.\textsuperscript{27}

**Climate change and rising energy costs**

The potential impact of climate change and rising energy costs transcends those of well-being, overconsumption and inequalities for two reasons. First, their potential negative impact on health is greater, and second, neither politicians nor society can ignore them.

Climate chaos could have a variety of detrimental impacts on health.\textsuperscript{28} Although climatic fluctuations have historically always been with us, it is now clear that our economic activities are at least partially responsible for a recent rise in global average temperatures. This has prompted concern about rising sea levels and an increased frequency of severe weather for much of the globe, and the resultant deleterious effects that this would have on health.

Rising energy costs could lead to a global economic recession and compromise many of the systems which make the modern way of life possible. Continued unplanned growth in energy usage may result in further wars in the competition for finite resources (as has already been played out in Iraq),\textsuperscript{29} and a rapid reversal of globalization. This is a situation in which prioritization of health and human well-being would almost certainly be compromised.\textsuperscript{30}

The question is not whether global temperatures and oil prices will rise, but by how much and how soon.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, the most sturdy nail in the coffin of economic growth is that of its unsustainability.

**Conclusion**

Clearly, much of life will go on as before. People will get sick and some will require hospital care. Screening and other programmes will continue. However, all of these will be subject to diminishing returns when considered against the challenges of sustainability. Other activities such as the expansion of airports simply need to be put into reverse.\textsuperscript{32} This is more than a new approach to health. It is a new approach to life, but those reading this paper have a distinctive contribution to make.\textsuperscript{33}

Therefore, we need a new approach which:

- recognizes the need to fundamentally change our economy, our culture, our communities and
our individual behaviours before inevitable changes result in detrimental outcomes;
● recognizes that action needs to be taken now;
● develops an alternative vision for a society with a new central purpose, once the dangers of economic growth on the current model have been internalized; and
● begins the hard work of creating detailed values, policies, programmes and interventions which will address these challenges.

This is the generic challenge. For the community of professionals who read this journal, the distinctive contribution will be the creation of new models of public health and health care that embrace these new realities.

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References