



## Shift the dial on climate change and health inequalities

### Transcript of podcast - 17 October 2023

#### Helen Stewart

Hi, welcome to the next podcast in our Shift the Dial on health inequalities series. This one is about climate change and its impact on child health inequalities in the UK. I'm Helen Stewart and I'm the Officer for Health Improvement at the College and I'm joined by Alex.

#### Alex Lemaigre

Yes. Hi, I am Alex Lemaigre. I am a paediatric trainee based in London. I'm also part of the Climate Change working group. As the deputy chair of the advocating for change work stream and I was one of the members of the Clinical Reference Group for this toolkit that we're going to be talking about today.

#### Helen

Fantastic. So you've been involved in climate work for a while then. So what was it that got you interested in it?

#### Alex

I think I've always had or it's certainly in my adult life an interest in climate change and just gradually over time have just become increasingly aware of exactly how far reaching the consequences are. You know, when you're first introduced to the concept, it's kind of framed in an ice caps and polar bears and penguins and then... eventually you realise that it affects everybody on the planet. And the more you find out, the worse it is.

And so I got to a point where I wanted to do more than just change things in my daily life and try and have an impact and the RCPCH climate Change Working Group was formed and this just felt like the right opportunity to get involved and try and make a difference.

#### Helen

Brilliant. So I suppose as a paediatrician for myself, I don't think it's something that is particularly part of the conversation or hasn't certainly hasn't been until quite recently and I certainly until doing this piece of work, didn't feel that I had a real grasp of it. So what do you think it is that paediatricians need to know about the impact of climate change on child health and on inequalities in the UK?

#### Alex

I think the first thing is actually being aware that it that it does have an impact because as you say, it's not really, it doesn't really feature in the curriculum and it doesn't necessarily

come up that much in your day-to-day practise unless you're aware of it. So it can affect lots of different ways. But in child health, particularly looking at things like the impact on air quality and air pollution on health is one of the most direct things that we can see.

And the fact that actually there is so much evidence now to say that poor air quality affects you from the moment you're a foetus right the way through your life and leads to poorer health outcomes, which is something that I don't think is publicised enough in the media.

And yeah, like you, I just wasn't quite aware of how profound the impact was until I started getting more involved.

### **Helen**

Yeah, absolutely. I think I've definitely been guilty of the ice caps and polar bears type view in the past. And I think doing this piece of work - because we have produced a piece of work that goes hopefully give paediatricians the information that they need as part of this toolkit. And it was really eye opening in terms of the kind of local impact directly, as you said, air quality really big, really big part of it. But also the flooding risks etc. so that the coastal communities often are quite deprived areas, which already brings its own problems, but they're going to be more at risk of flooding and don't have the resources to leave those areas. So it was really interesting for me to see how actually it's a very clear and present danger in our own backyard.

### **Alex**

Yeah, exactly. You know, just being able to cope with the changes that we're seeing already just in our own climate here, which is, you know, by no means on a global scale the most affected of course. But you know, you think back to the heatwave last summer and how difficult that was. And how, if you're in a low-income household, actually being able to cope with that heat is really difficult because you can't, you know, you can't -- it's very it's unlikely that you'll be able to afford to put in air conditioning, and it's going to become a much more prevalent problem. So it's a real issue.

### **Helen**

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, absolutely. And with the flooding and the increase in damp housing and the impact on respiratory health already impacted by other issues to do with health inequalities, it's really it's, it's really increasing in its in its impact, I would say.

I mean, we're having the hottest October we've had for many years, aren't we at the moment? So it really has been brought into focus.

So as paediatricians, I think traditionally we've always focused on health and illness. So do you think we have a role in trying to address these climate change related inequalities?

### **Alex**

Yeah, I think I think we have to, you know, if our job is to try and improve child health, not just deal with the consequences of poor health and, you know, ideally every time you see, every consultation, you're doing a little bit of health promotion. Hopefully, you know, we advise on healthy eating and exercise and all of this. And then you've got all these other factors that people maybe aren't aware of or that are having an impact and a significant impact.

And so yes, if we're going to try and promote good health in the children, and that's both physical and mental health 'cause it does have an effect on both, then we, then we have to be tuned into this and try. And it can feel overwhelming, of course, because it's such a big issue, but try to advocate for our patients and do what we can to at least raise awareness and then mitigate in in however way we can the effects.

### Helen

Definitely I found it really interesting to see the impact it was having on mental health actually because obviously we've all seen a rise in mental health problems in young people. I work in emergency department and we're seeing a lot, a lot more presentations of quite severe mental health difficulties and actually eco-anxiety is part of that. Which I was really surprised about. Like young people are incredibly aware of what's going on and are very informed about the impact it's having and concerned for their future.

### Alex

And rightly so, because it's a real issue and they're obviously going to suffer the most because they're going to be on the planet for longer. And yet there's this kind of societal expectation that they're the generation that are going to fix it, where currently they they have really, young people certainly have, you know, not as much in terms of agency or influence on policy and things. So they have, you know, the pressure of being expected to fix something that they haven't really contributed to. And that's going to affect them greatly over the, you know, the course of their lifetime.

And that's a lot to bear. And I think it's understandable that it's such a heavy burden for them and having such a profound effect on their mental health.

### Helen

Definitely. So what we're trying to achieve with this toolkit is obviously that we can educate paediatricians, provide the information there for them to understand the impact it's having on their patients. And also try and support them in being active and doing something about it.

So we've produced a piece on advocacy for action as well. So do you have any particular top tips for paediatricians to start with advocacy on action for climate change?

### Alex

Yeah, it's a hard one, isn't it? Because it, like I said before, I think it can feel really overwhelming and certainly that's where I was where before I joined the climate change Working group. I think for me the first thing is be informed, you know, improve your understanding and really understand the effects because that will. I was certainly as it did for me really motivate you and inspire you to want to do something about it.

And the second thing is not to. It doesn't have to be a huge thing. You can advocate at, you know, I don't want to say lower level because everything you do has an impact, but you know at a sort of more individualised level and start small and gradually build up as you increase your comfort zone.

And actually the toolkit takes you through different ways that you can do that, starting at an individual patient level and then, you know, if you're somebody who is inspired or who is already really active in this kind of thing, then where you can move on to a more local

level with maybe your integrated care board or just in your department or your trust, and then at local authority level, national level, etc.

So there's tips for everyone. But I think it doesn't have to be a scary thing and you can just start small and then build up, I think, yeah.

**Helen**

Yeah, I'm hopeful it won't be a massive change for people, particularly at the individual patient level, because I think there has been a move recently to think more about socioeconomic circumstances, the kind of structural situation going on in their lives and the impact that has. Because some of the child poverty stuff, talking about what housing they're living in, you know, overcrowded housing, access to green spaces, those kind of things. And a lot of it does link in with the climate stuff. So hopefully it shouldn't be a big change to add in a couple of questions about air pollution and other things that might be impacting. Because obviously we've got to think about food insecurity as well, haven't we with because I think nearly half of our food comes from other places?

**Alex**

Yeah.

**Helen**

And so that that supply is going to be an issue as well and that is going to be the people from the more deprived backgrounds that are going to struggle.

**Alex**

Yeah, exactly. And I think it's a good, it's because those are things that we already asked about. So you know, if you're seeing a patient with a respiratory condition, it is becoming routine to ask about mould and smoking and all that kind of thing. And therefore you can tailor that conversation start including things like air pollution.

And what's helpful is if you have a way to a solution. Because it's difficult to ask a question and then say, Oh well, too bad. Whereas with air pollution, even though it feels overwhelming, there are things you can do. So if they are going to school via a really busy road. Just a simple change of route you can advise on walking along the quieter route...

**Helen**

That's good, yeah.

**Alex**

...reduces the exposure to particulate matter and air pollution, which can just doing that, can improve their respiratory health. And similarly with the food thing, while it's difficult, obviously we can't do much on a global food security scale. And you're right that, you know, with climate change affecting food production globally plus the energy crisis and everything else, those households who have more limited income are going to really struggle to maintain the same level of food quality and/or quantity. And that brings all of its own health problems – be that malnutrition, obesity, whatever.

But if you're having a conversation about a healthy diet, then maybe familiarise yourself with things locally, you know, if there are food banks or third sector kind of organisations that might be able to help support a household with getting food on the table.

Then having kind of that in your armoury might help facilitate those conversations.

### **Helen**

Definitely. There's so much crossover with the poverty work as well, isn't there? It's all very similar.

So I know that colleagues working in general paediatrics - after mould was brought up in a case of a child who unfortunately passed away - they got a real increase in referrals from primary care about housing. And so there'll be a letter with the toolkit that will. I'll be able to send off in support of patients who need improvements to their housing. Won't there?

### **Alex**

There is, yeah, it's a really good template letter that was actually developed by the team at Barts Health, who have a clinic specifically dedicated to this kind of environmental health type stuff. And it's very powerful. It's got lots of legislation and stuff which kind of adds weight to your voice and your opinion about the responsibilities of landlords and things with regards to maintaining safe housing. And so that template will be available for paediatricians to use, and edit as they need to, to help support their patients with housing applications and things like that. And it's nice to have that template because you know that the right information is going to be on there and you can tailor it to your specific patient as well.

### **Helen**

Yeah, that'll hopefully be a really useful resource for people.

I think the key point for me, as I was going through some of this stuff was like we've said, the crossover with the poverty work, and this is not going to affect everybody equally. It's going to impact on the people that are already being impacted by inequality in society. And as the climate crisis gets worse, that's only going to increase. So I think, unfortunately, if we can't act on this soon, then we're just going to see the inequalities in our society increase even more, aren't we?

### **Alex**

Absolutely. And it's not a problem that's going away. So as you say, it's kind of, it's just going to keep spiralling unless somebody does something. And that's why. This toolkit has been developed to try and increase awareness and hopefully fire up lots of paediatricians to try and do something and add our voice to already quite a lot of voices who are trying to do something about this for our patients.

### **Helen**

Yeah. Brilliant. What I do love about the toolkit is we've been able to use some of the work that the fantastic RCPCH &Us group have done. So there's quite a bit of input from the children and young people that we're able to talk to. And a lot of that is very similar to what we've talked about already in terms of kind of concern about the future, concern about the impact on their futures.

And if anyone gets a chance to have a look at the position statement, there's some great illustrations from some of these workshops that have been done and as we've talked about anxiety breathing problems, general wellbeing, lots of concerns about overheating

and food. And real concern amongst the coming generation that they are going to be the ones that suffer. And it is really powerful to read.

### Alex

Yeah, I agree. I think you know, one of the aspects of advocacy is adding patient stories to kind of bring that message home. Because it's quite easy to think about things in the abstract, particularly if you're somebody who's not personally horribly affected by it. And you know, it's like things like their case of Ella Kissi Debrah with the air pollution, and this little boy Awaab Ishak with the mould.

Having the RCPCH &Us voices and their illustrations and their writing. And some of them are really very young and you can see that they're already impacted by this and worried about it. It really does, yeah, bring that message home. And that policy statement obviously being directed more towards policy makers - hopefully will really add some, some gravitas to to this work.

### Helen

Mm, it's that kind of voice of the lived experience that really does have does add power, doesn't it? Yeah, it's really interesting.

### Helen

OK. So we've talked about the toolkit and the various elements and that will be going live on our website and should hopefully be there now if you wanted to go and have a look at the various elements which is on the College website at Shift The Dial on climate change. And part of that is there will be a system to e-mail your MP if you're really keen on helping to support this work, we're going to have a roundtable at the House of Parliament on the 12th of December.

And you'll be able to email your local MP to ask them if they'd like to go along. If you go to the website, it will link through. You can put your post code in and it will tell you who your MP is, give you a template and let you find the right person so the e-mail will go off.

And the fantastic thing about the event is that there will be children and young people there who will be able to give that perspective that we've been talking about, won't they?

### Alex

Yeah, exactly. I think that's it's an event that's being hosted by the RCPCH, but there's going to be doctors and representatives from the children and young people's group. So getting as many MPs as possible there to be able to tell them in person and not rely on them to read, you know, read our policy statement or any of that, we'll be able to really hopefully have an impact.

So please, it shouldn't take very long as your first part of advocacy for reducing the health inequalities that are impacted by climate change. Just click on that button and invite your MP along. It'd be great to get as many MPs as possible there and go, you know all these important policymakers fired up, hopefully, to want to make a change and improve the lives of the children and young people in the UK.

### Helen

Absolutely. It's a fantastic opportunity and I think the kiosk as always is we've just, we

need policy action to stop making health inequalities worse and really start to improve things for children and their health in this country.

**Alex**

Exactly.

**Helen**

Fantastic. Well, thank you very much, Alex.

**Alex**

Thank you.

**Helen**

So thank you very much for listening and if you'd like more information on any of our health inequalities work, please go to [www.rcpch.ac.uk/ShiftTheDial](http://www.rcpch.ac.uk/ShiftTheDial). And if you're specifically looking for the work on climate change, follow that with OnClimateChange. Thank you.