



STUDENT NURSES

YOUNG NURSES TAKE ACTION ON CLIMATE CHANGE

A group of Vancouver Island University grads are providing research to support BCNU's development of a position statement on climate change and human health

WHEN SPEAKING WITH Tanys Latham, it quickly becomes clear that the Duncan-based nurse is concerned about her patients' health and well-being.

"Last year we had forest fires across BC. There was a big cloud of smoke over Vancouver Island and many people were suffering," she remarks.

Latham is a graduate of Vancouver Island University's (VIU) Bachelor of Science in Nursing program and recently began working at Cowichan District Hospital. She's one of a growing number of young nurses concerned about climate change, and she believes that nurses have an important role to play when it comes to responding to the crisis.

"Anyone with cardiovascular issues, or with a job working outside would have been affected and likely would

"We can have a big influence on the public and in the community by spreading awareness."

Tanys Latham

seek help from our doctors, a health-care professional, or even come into the emergency room – climate change directly impacts my work."

Latham says there's no question that the impacts of climate change are becoming ever more visible. Forest fires and droughts are more catastrophic and frequent, aquaculture is under threat as the oceans become more acidic, ecosystems are destabilizing, precipitation patterns are changing, glaciers are melting and sea levels are rising.

Provincial government data forecast drier summers with more severe heat

waves and wetter winters. Annual rainfall is expected to increase between two and 12 percent over the next 30 years. And by 2050, average BC temperatures are expected to have increased by as much as 2.7C. All to say, climate change is real and it is happening now.

Despite such ominous warnings, Latham says she's inspired by nurse-leaders like Dr. Ann E. Kurth who have called on health-care professionals to rise to the challenges climate change poses. Citing Kurth's 2017 report *Planetary Health and the Role of Nursing: A Call to*

Action, Latham argues that nurses are trusted leaders and providers of health care and are in a position to contribute to resilient health systems. "Kurth argues that nurses are change makers who can impact the world," she says. "And nurses have an obligation to prepare for climate change and other impacts of ecosystem strain on human health."

Latham is ready to rise to the challenge, but she says more needs to be done early on to equip nursing students for their role in supporting adaptation to and mitigation of climate change.

EDUCATION AND AWARENESS NEEDED

Kurt Kuzminski is a classmate of Latham's, and another graduate of VIU's BSN program. Last year he began working as a public health nurse for Vancouver Coastal Health on a child and youth team, serving a population that ranges between five and 25 years of age. →



FUTURE FOCUSED

Vancouver Island University BSN grads Serena Gaiga, Tanyas Latham, Ivo Nikolov, Kurt Kuzminski and Dulcie Thomson are helping raise awareness about links between climate change, nursing, and human health.

→ He believes that information and education on climate change is something that is hugely missing in nursing education.

Kuzminski reports that throughout his four years of nursing education, there was one two-hour lecture that only briefly outlined climate change. “And that was it,” he exclaims. “In four years, the biggest public health issue of the century and it only had two hours of air time in a bachelor of science nursing degree.”

VIU nursing students are required to complete a Community of Practice course in years three and four of their BSN program. Kuzminski says that he and his colleagues saw the course as an opportunity to address the limited attention that climate change is given in nursing education. He credits the leadership of cohort member Serena Gaiga for spearheading a new Community of Practice (CoP) under the supervision of VIU professors Jeff Lewis, Maureen O’Connor and Lynn Rollison that researched how climate change, nursing and human health are linked.

Kuzminski, Latham, Gaiga and other founding members of the CoP even formed

“We need to educate in our degree programs, and within our professional bodies, about the health risks and benefits of climate action.”

Kurt Kuzminski

their very own student organization – Nursing Students for Environmental Action Today (NEAT) – with the goal of contributing to climate change research and education.

Prior to helping establish NEAT, Kuzminski and Latham were both involved with Awareness of Climate Change through Education and Research (ACER) – a VIU-based public outreach initiative that promotes greater understanding of the scientific and social implications of climate change to students and the general public. ACER consists of students from different educational disciplines who perform science demonstrations on campus describing how climate change occurs.

The two groups soon decided to join forces.

“When NEAT was founded, it was an intuitive next step for the group to

join ACER, to educate each other and work together,” explains Kuzminski. “ACER already addressed the science of climate change. What they didn’t have were the health effects of climate change, so we were contributing the public health perspective.”

NEAT organized several educational events, one of them being an on-campus screening of the award-winning 2016 environmental documentary *Before the Flood*.

In April 2017, ACER and NEAT students volunteered to host a public talk by prominent author and activist Maude Barlow, who read from her book *Boiling Point: Government Neglect, Corporate Abuse, and Canada’s Water Crisis*. The event was extremely well attended, as a full house of 300 people showed up to hear Barlow speak

at Nanaimo’s Bowen Park Recreation Complex.

Later that year NEAT organized a climate change symposium at VIU titled *Climate Change and Human Health* and invited several leading academic researchers from across BC to speak.

WORKING WITH BCNU

The NEAT students reached a significant milestone in 2017, when they were encouraged to provide input into the development of a BCNU position statement on climate change.

Kuzminski was already active in the union through his role as a BCNU student liaison at VIU. He attended the BCNU annual convention in 2016 and raised the issue of the need for equity-based action for climate change mitigation.

NEAT was then invited to attend convention the following year. Latham and classmate Charmaine Lightfoot presented an early version of NEAT’s school poster and talked to nurses from all over the province during convention’s education day.

NEAT member Ivo Nikolov was also attending as a Pacific Rim region delegate.

While there he spoke about NEAT's research and raised the question of how BCNU could help increase awareness about climate change among nurses. Throughout convention, the young nurses' engagement with fellow members helped further the recognition that a union position statement on climate change and health in BC was needed.

"Ivo offered to share our research to help write the background section of the position statement," says Kuzminski. The offer was accepted, and as a result, NEAT's fourth year final project became a literature review of research on climate change and human health.

The students chose to highlight the eight prerequisites of health outlined by the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion – peace, shelter, education, food,

income, a stable eco-system, sustainable resources and social justice – and find research demonstrating how climate change directly and indirectly impacts these prerequisites. The literature review is now informing BCNU's ongoing research and development of a union position statement that is scheduled to be published later this year.

The NEAT students feel honoured to be given the opportunity to contribute directly to BCNU's work on the issue. But they say the most valuable part of the experience has been a deepening of their understanding of the climate crisis and its effects. This in turn motivated the group to think about how they could make a positive impact on the broader nursing community they are now a part of.

Kuzminski says researching climate change affected

the trajectory of his career. "Having worked in CT scanning at a level-one trauma centre, and on call with the BC Ambulance Service, I wanted to become an emergency department nurse. That's what I knew, and it's where I thought I could do the most amount of good," he reflects. "But after learning about the greatest threat to human health this century, I chose to pursue the branch of nursing that is most closely linked to climate action: public health."

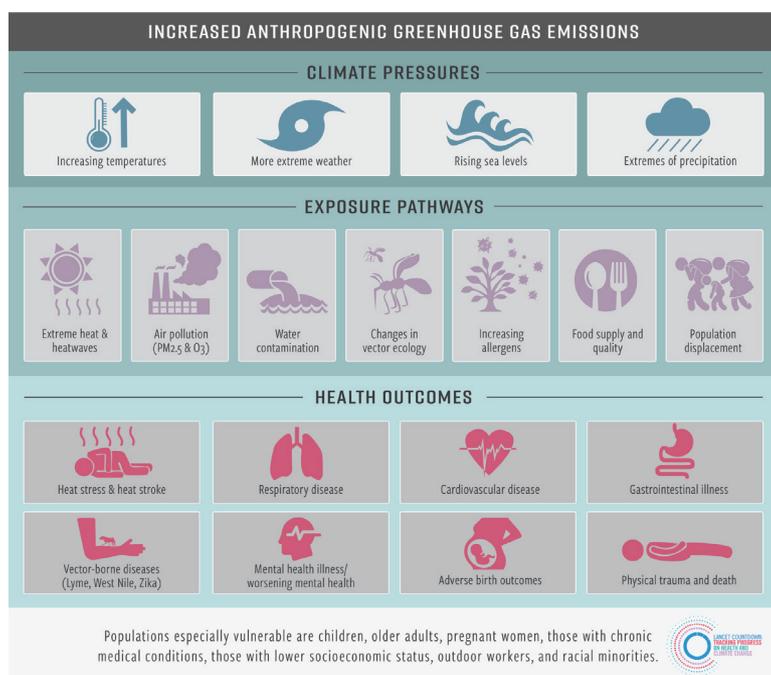
Looking to the future, Kuzminski says he's focused on education and advocacy. "We need to educate in our degree programs, and within our professional bodies, about the health benefits of climate action. We also need to advocate for policy change—a great way to do that is to ask all federal parties to make climate change a priority in their platforms."

He says unions have a critical role to play, and describes the voice of BCNU as "bold, innovative and powerful."

Latham agrees. "As a union, BCNU has power in numbers," she says. "We can have a big influence on the general public and in the community by spreading awareness, educating the public, mitigating the effects of climate change, and planning for the future."

There is no question that all NEAT members are committed to making climate change a priority issue in their practice and in their careers. And all believe that nurses are leaders in the health-care system and in their communities, and that the effects of climate change directly affect their work.

"The cost of inaction would be devastating," argues Kuzminski. "That means taking action should be an urgent priority for us all." •



LANCET COUNTDOWN TRACKING PROGRESS ON HEALTH AND CLIMATE CHANGE

THE LANCET COUNTDOWN IS AN INDEPENDENT, global monitoring system dedicated to tracking the health dimensions of the impacts of, and the response to, climate change.

The Countdown tracks 41 indicators across five domains: climate change impacts, exposures, and vulnerability; adaptation, planning, and resilience for health; mitigation actions and health co-benefits; finance and economics; and public and political engagement.

Its annual reports are the product of a collaboration of 27 leading academic institutions, the UN, and intergovernmental agencies from every continent.

Find out more at www.lancetcountdown.org

Health Impacts of Climate Change. Credit: M.Lee for the US Lancet Countdown Brief