

# Climate Change and Health

Duodecim - University of Tampere Global Health Summit

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Address by John Ashton

## Raising the Dead

What can health professionals do about climate change?

1. It's an honour to follow such a brilliant talk by Pekka [Haavisto]. But also a heavy responsibility.
2. Anyway, sometimes you just have to resort to verse. So here goes.

*Lo, Nemi! navell'd in the woody hills  
So far, that the uprooting wind which tears  
The oak from his foundation, and which spills  
The ocean o'er its boundary, and bears  
Its foam against the skies, reluctant spares  
The oval mirror of thy glassy lake;  
And calm as cherish'd hate, its surface wears  
A deep cold settled aspect nought can shake,  
All coil'd into itself and round, as sleeps the snake.*

3. Surrounded by the Alban Hills, not far from the papal residence at Castelgandolfo, concealed from casual eyes by the forbidding rim of an old volcanic crater, there nestles a body of water so modest in extent that it might easily escape the notice of a

refugee from the summer stupor of nearby Rome. Human footprints have been criss-crossing this rich soil for thousands of years. But there is no signpost that now invites you towards the lake, no beaten track drawing you to the secret hidden in the trees by its northern shore.

4. Now step off the road, clamber down the slope, cast your eye towards the water, so eerily calm, and enter another world. This is a place that, once visited, leaves on your imagination a mark you will carry to the grave; a place where ancestral memories seep out of the rocks like molten basalt.
5. No matter how incandescent the blue Italian sky, here all light seems to be sucked into the depths of the lake. However sultry the afternoon, the chill as you descend into the crater makes you shiver.
6. Yes, there is menace as well as mystery here, captured perfectly in those lines from Childe Harold's Pilgrimage by Byron.
7. *Calm as cherished hate.....All coil'd into itself and round, as sleeps the snake.*
8. The spot named on modern maps as the Lake of Nemi is perhaps best known today for the wild strawberries that announce the arrival of summer, strawberries so fragrant that they are celebrated - this is Italy after all - with their own local festival every June, round about now in fact, the *Sagra delle Fragole*.
9. But to earlier inhabitants, this was *Speculum Dianae*, Diana's Mirror, after the cult of Diana that

had long flourished in that grove on the northern edge of the lake.

10. At the heart of the grove was an oak, venerable already in antiquity. This was the tree that, via a painting by Turner, inspired Frazer to write his epic meditation *The Golden Bough*.
11. A fearsome tabu protected this tree. Only a runaway slave was permitted to break so much as a twig. And to do so was a last throw of the dice, since the slave then had to fight the resident priest to the death. If the slave won, he in turn became King of the Wood, Rex Nemorensis, until the next successful challenge.
12. Go today to the grove at Nemi. Close your eyes. I defy you not to hear the jangling of swords, feel on your cheek the warm spray of crimson blood that would from time to time decorate the verdure of this strange killing ground. As Byron discovered, its grizzly ritual cycle is imprinted on the place like grooves in a gramophone record.
13. Ladies and gentlemen, anyone setting out on a career in the healing professions, your professions, should make a pilgrimage to Nemi, wander through its grove and gaze into Diana's dark Mirror. It seems to me that if you in your special calling have a spiritual point of origin, it is here.
14. You see, these trees have another secret. A secret that puts death and life back into balance.
15. The founder of the Nemi cult, so it was believed, was an old man, so frail he looked as if all his bones had been broken, who had arrived one day

out of the blue and taken up residence. He was known locally as Virbius.

16. But Virbius was not what he seemed.
17. He had been born Hippolytus, son of the hero Theseus, in another country. As he grew towards adulthood he would spend his days chasing beasts in the forest with the virgin huntress Artemis, as Diana was known in those lands. Proud of her divine society, as Frazer puts it, he spurned the love of mortal women. And that undid him.
18. Hippolytus became a pawn in an Olympian drama as full of passion and violence as any modern soap opera.
19. But to cut a long story short.....poor Hippolytus found himself dragged to his death by stampeding horses, breaking all his bones in the process.
20. Diana was not exactly thrilled to learn of the demise of her hunting companion. She had come to enjoy his company. You get the impression that had he continued to cavort with her she might not have remained a virgin huntress.
21. Anyway, at the time of these events the go to doctor was Asklepios, whose staff and serpent is still today the physician's emblem. *A gentle craftsman who drove pain away, a joy to men, bringing them golden health* Homer wrote of him. I'm sure that's what your patients say about you.
22. So Diana asked Asklepios to bring Hippolytus back to life. It was usually a good idea to do what Diana wanted. Asklepios no doubt relished the

**challenge of raising the dead. And so he revived the comely young man.**

- 23. But of course there were consequences.**
- 24. Now Zeus was displeased. No mortal was supposed to enter the gates of death and return. So Zeus struck Asklepios down with one of his thunderbolts, and that was the end of him.**
- 25. You can guess what happened next. Fearing Zeus would do the same to her companion, Diana turned Hippolytus into an old man, changed his name to Virbius, and packed him off to Nemi. There he founded the cult of the grove to honour her, and appointed himself the first Rex Nemorensis.**
- 26. So yes, make a pilgrimage to the grove and gaze into Diana's Mirror. In it you will see enacted the foundational drama of your calling. The first doctor cures the first patient, who gets a new lease on life in the forest.**
- 27. Make a pilgrimage to the grove, gaze into the waters, and reflect on the power that makes your calling special. The rest of us fear death and turn our backs on it whenever we can. You look it in the eye every day, and from time to time like Asklepios you make Death blink first, and your patient gets a new lease of life.**
- 28. You tap into powers that our ancestors attributed in awe to the Gods. You enjoy privileged access to their world - the world into which Diana's Mirror is a kind of portal.**

- 29. But there is a price. There is always a price. In return for your privilege you place yourselves constant peril. You must not overreach. You spend every day between the horns of exquisite medical dilemmas. You must live by the values of your calling and never betray them. To do so would disrupt the natural order. And Zeus never runs out of thunderbolts.**
- 30. So go the grove, look into the lake, and reflect on one further detail of this story. According to some accounts, Diana offered gold to Asklepios if he would save Hippolytus, and Asklepios took it. Mortal gold for sacred life. Was that what really angered Zeus?**
- [PAUSE]**
- 31. You can't make sense of where you are, you can't find your path forward when the fog descends, unless you remember where you came from.**
- 32. For some time now, the fog has been descending and it's the fog of war.**
- 33. Not, to be sure, a war of bullets, shells and missiles. This is a struggle between conflicting ideas about what it means to be human in our interdependent world.**
- 34. The outcome of this war will not determine merely the fate of nations, continents or peoples. On it will hinge what now happens to the civilization we have built, the world's first truly global civilization. Will the next act, like the last, be a story of Ascent? Or are we on the verge of a Fall?**

35. Remember the Arnold Toynbee dictum of which Anthony [Costello] reminded us<sup>1</sup>.
36. Oh, and if the wrong side wins there will actually be no shortage of bullets, shells and missiles. And when we run out of those, ploughshares will be melted down for swords.
37. We are all combatants in this war. To stand aside is itself to take sides.
38. No group of people will play a more decisive part than the one you represent here in the Finlandia Hall today: professionals in medicine and public health, and their friends in politics, civil society, the media, business and elsewhere.

[PAUSE]

39. I grew up in a medical family.
40. My mother is a clinical psychopharmacologist, known for her pioneering work on tranquillizer dependency, and for helping countless victims escape their addiction. Look up *Ashton Manual* on Google. My cousin has fought in the UK and globally for an integrated, prevention-based approach to public health in cities.
41. I have many reasons also to be thankful for the care I have received through our National Health Service from dedicated professionals across many disciplines.
42. So although I cannot claim to be one of you, I have grown up close to you, I am part of your

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<sup>1</sup> "Civilizations die from suicide, not murder".

extended family, I have some understanding of how the world looks through your eyes. And nobody could more admire what you do and how you do it.

43. It seems to me that there are some aspects of how you engage with the world that are relevant to the war that is now being waged. Perhaps it is not an overstatement to call them values. Anyway it is worth dwelling for a moment on a few of them.
44. *Non nocere*. From the days of Hippocrates, whatever you do, you bend over backwards not to do harm.
45. The outcome, for you, is everything. The patient lives, the patient dies. You use evidence not dogma to decide on the intervention that will have the best achievable possible outcome.
46. We are all, for you, equal in sickness. When we are at our most vulnerable, what we have in common as human beings transcends what divides us one from another: friend or enemy, rich or poor, neighbour or stranger.
47. Go to slums and conflict zones around the world and you will find doctors, surgeons, and nurses who choose to leave behind comfortable homes and careers, often exposing themselves to danger, to care for strangers in need. Many of you in this hall, including Per [Ashorn], have done that.
48. Your care about each individual patient but also about the well-being of the population as a whole. Otherwise none of you would have given up a day to attend a Summit on climate change and health. To that extent you share with many others the



notion that there can be no good life except as part of a good society.

49. You understand that it is not enough to alleviate the symptoms. No cure is complete unless you investigate and deal with the cause, even if to do so you must confront conventional wisdom and vested interests.
50. That is the moral of Dr John Snow's famous battle, a stone's throw from the Middlesex Hospital where I was born, to close down the pump whose contaminated water was spreading cholera throughout London in the days when most doctors attributed the disease to a miasma of foul air.
51. Above all, you stand for progress. Through observation, reason, and the will if necessary to struggle for your advances, you have constantly enhanced our understanding of the human organism and how to repair it when it breaks down. As a result, with ups and downs over the centuries, each generation has been able to pass on to the next the prospect of a longer, healthier life.
52. Isn't that what defines the global civilization we have created? The idea that by applying reason and will to the conditions we observe, each generation can offer a better prospect to the next?
53. For much of my life, these were not merely the values my mother and my cousin took to work. They shaped the society I lived in. They were part of the culture of postwar Britain.
54. Or were they?

- 55. Farmers were learning to feed antibiotics to healthy livestock to make them grow faster and tolerate unhealthy cramped conditions. Almost half of all antibiotics are now consumed by farm animals. Your warnings that this would hasten the evolution of resistant pathogens fell on deaf ears.**
- 56. So much for do no harm.**
- 57. The British Medical Journal recently revealed, in a brilliant analysis by Jonathan Gornall, how manufacturers and retailers, supported by sympathetic politicians, induced our government to break its promise to introduce a minimum unit price for alcohol.**
- 58. Politicians don't like to be accused of breaking promises. It can cost them dear. That's why, as you may have noticed, when they make a promise many of them (not Pekka!) try to give themselves some wriggle room.**
- 59. Here there was no wriggle room. The evidence of for public health benefits was convincing. So when David Cameron made the promise, it was unambiguous. And yet a public pledge by our Prime Minister proved no match for a combination of vested interests, cleverly harnessed to the aversion shared by much of our elite to such blatant intervention in the market. (Incidentally that's why nothing came of the Sarkozy initiative you heard about to curb food price speculation.)**
- 60. So much for the pursuit of outcomes informed by evidence.**

- 61. Nothing in public health is more controversial than mental illness. My only qualification to talk about it is some family experience of our primary mental health care system in action. So I don't want to stick my neck out too far.**
- 62. But there is plainly a mental health crisis in Britain. Our hostels, our prisons, our food banks, our general practice clinics are full of people in no mental condition to cope with the stresses and complexities of modern society. Shrinking budgets have hit them disproportionately. We do not give our mentally ill the care you would expect in a humane and wealthy society. We treat them as outcasts.**
- 63. So much for equality in sickness and for shared humanity.**
- 64. One of our greatest cities is Glasgow. I've been spending time there recently.**
- 65. Glasgow has more than its share of deprivation. In one part of the city, Calton, a study was carried out a few years ago to find out how long people were living. It turned out that the average male life expectancy was less than 54. Calton is perhaps an extreme case, but in many of our cities, over much of our country, there are enclaves where life is similarly short.**
- 66. When I first came across this I could hardly believe it. In a country where many people expect to live comfortably into their eighties, how could such a disparity exist and not be felt as a national emergency requiring urgent attention?**

- 67. So much for the good society.**
- 68. Our approach to public health in Britain is responsive not preventive.**
- 69. Yes, we pay lip service to prevention. But we focus on fixing the health problems generated by the way our economy works; not on fixing the economy to improve public health. In education, housing, transport, energy, farming and food, justice, the tax system and many other areas there is so much more we could do, to the benefit both of public health and the economy itself - and indeed the climate, as Anthony pointed out.**
- 70. So much for a focus on causes not just symptoms.**
- 71. And as for progress, well, there is now a consensus that our teenagers today are likely to die younger than their parents. By age 11, a third of British children are obese or overweight, already on the path to premature deaths from cancer, strokes and diseases of the heart, respiratory system or liver.**
- 72. We face a decline in longevity. That's despite the breakthroughs you have made in my lifetime in treating and eradicating infectious disease. And it's despite the fact that we know why this cohort is likely to die younger and what we would need to do to prevent that: better food, more exercise, less alcohol and so on.**
- 73. There can be no more astonishing collective reversal than the first secular, self-inflicted decline**

**in life expectancy we shall have experienced in our entire history as a species.**

**74. So much for progress.**

**[PAUSE]**

**75. Climate change is not of itself a hard problem.**

**76. We know how to fix the climate. We have the technology and wealth to do it. What we have not found so far is the will to mobilize those assets.**

**77. To fix the climate, we must address the cause as well as the symptoms. The cause is not the lack of will to act on climate. The cause in our modern post-industrial societies is the lack of will full stop. Without it we cannot hope to agree on the outcomes that the public interest requires and to do what is necessary to secure those outcomes. At its root the climate problem and the public health problem are the same, and have the same solution.**

**78. In the case of climate change, the link with progress could not be stronger.**

**79. Without climate security, there can be no security in the interconnected systems we rely on for food, water, and energy. And if any one of those systems breaks down somewhere, they all break down everywhere. That's interdependence.**

**80. Without food, water, energy and climate security, the conditions for global cooperation to deal with global problems break down. Take that from a diplomat. The advances we have made in**

**development over the last generation - with you and your peers in the front line - will go into reverse.**

**81. And the conditions for public health will be degraded. Remember, that's what we're discussing today. Symptoms and causes. The big threat is not that climate change will directly add to the burden of sickness through heatstroke, epidemics, migrating disease vectors, and so on. Yes it will do that too. But the big threat is that by weakening the economic, social and ultimately the political conditions that are necessary to sustain a healthy society it will make ill health more prevalent and harder to deal with.**

**82. If the fog were to lift now we would see that where we stand, if we stick to the path that has taken us here, is Apogee. The point at which, imperceptibly at first, Ascent regresses into Fall.**

**83. We can continue along that path. Or we can choose to make a new one that will carry us further up the slope.**

**84. To fix the climate we need to rebuild the energy system within a generation, so that we get the energy we need without carbon emissions from fossil fuels. That means electricity mainly from renewable sources. Electrification of transport and heating. Using energy less profligately.**

**85. We can do all that, if that's what we decide we want. Some of that, yes, is about behavior change. But a lot more of it is about policy change, to divert towards low carbon outcomes the rivers of capital still surging into the fossil energy economy. About policy change and therefore about changing**

**politics, because politics begets policy and sets its level of ambition.**

- 86. We do not have to abolish capitalism. Nor do we have to sacrifice prosperity, even in the short term.**
- 87. In my six years as a climate change envoy for the UK, the argument always used by those who wanted to rein in our ambition was: “this will cost us growth and jobs”. “Why don’t we wait until America or China do a bit more?”, they whispered.**
- 88. The intellectual framework on which that argument is based is the framework that collapsed in 2008, as a result of which the British economy is still nearly one sixth smaller than it was supposed to be by now.**
- 89. While our economy was in recession, our low carbon economy was growing at 4% each year, as it still is. One day less than a month ago, Germany, not widely seen as a failing economy, set a new record. Over three quarters of its power at midday came from renewable sources.**
- 90. Globally, the additional investment required to transform the energy system is roughly of the same magnitude as the subsidies we now devote to fossil energy - about half a trillion dollars a year.**

**[PAUSE]**

- 91. I have been involved in the politics of climate change for nearly 20 years. This has brought me into contact with people from every profession, from all walks of life, all over the world. It has been a privilege.**

- 92. There is no group of professionals more curious about climate change, more engaged, more committed to doing the right thing, than the group you represent.**
- 93. Medical student activists like Izzy Braithwaite with whom I have had the pleasure of working. Leaders of your professions, people in the UK like Fiona Godlee, Andy Haines, Hugh Montgomery, David McCoy, Nick Watts and of course Anthony Costello who spoke today. Veterans of earlier campaigns like Robin Stott in the UK and Eric Chivian in the US (whose recent essay in the BMJ, *Why doctors and their organisations must help tackle climate change*, is obligatory reading.)**
- 94. You are determined to contribute as much as you can to this struggle.**
- 95. So here's my challenge to you.**
- 96. Forgive me but you really have no idea of the enormous, indeed decisive difference you could make to the climate effort if you were to harness the compassion that goes with your calling to a strategic understanding focused not just on the symptoms but on the political cause of this problem.**
- 97. Here are some suggestions for a mobilization plan on climate change for public health professionals.**
- 98. Be really clear about what is needed - an emissions free energy system - and call for it**



**explicitly and at every opportunity. But also dramatize it by pressing for concrete outcomes that can be delivered within your institutional and professional domain.**

**99. In a way it doesn't matter what those outcomes are as long as they match the ambition we need. But there is one clear call around which medical professionals are now rallying. It is the call for medical and health institutions - hospital trusts, universities with medical schools, professional bodies and so on – not to hold fossil energy assets.**

**100. Stanford University has just decided to divest. Norway's sovereign wealth fund, the biggest in the world, is considering doing so (perhaps ironic considering where its money comes from).**

**101. The markets have started to realize that we can't deal with climate change, and governments can't keep the promises they've made on it, if at the same time we burn all the coal, oil, and gas that is still in the ground but currently priced into asset values. To assume that governments will just walk away from their promises is to take on a massive political risk. So trustees and fund managers can no longer hide behind their prudential responsibilities. Divestment looks more and more like the prudential choice.**

**102. But do not pursue this in isolation from all those other things, more obviously linked to health, for which you campaign. The campaign on sugar is in that sense a climate campaign; the divestment campaign is a health campaign. At the same time, don't stop drawing attention to the direct threats that climate change poses to health. And don't**

**hang back because these seem too controversial or complex.**

**103. Reflect all this in the story you tell each other and the rest of us about the problems we face, the choices we need to make, and the values on which those choices should be based. Communicate that story confidently and in accessible language outside your professional boundaries.**

**104. At the moment you focus tenaciously and often effectively on the specific problems that trouble you. But you have not woven them into a fabric depicting the kind of healthy society you want to help bring about. You do not have a compelling and coherent political story. You are too respectful of those who currently use their power to entrench the status quo.**

**105. You may say that's a job for politics. But politics is failing you. Our politics belongs to us all. It is how we make choices together about where we want to go. It's the only way we have to do that. If we don't use our voices, we cannot complain about not being heard.**

**106. Most of you, in response to Anthony's multiple choice question, felt that climate change is the most important challenge humanity faces, and that we must now do all it takes to deal with it. This is how we do all that it takes. This is how we take politics back, so that it is about "us" not "them" and so we can use it to address the real public interest.**

**107. That's also, in response to the earlier question, how we make the UN negotiations work. Whether**

**we can do that - and it is essential that we do - will be decided not in the negotiating chamber but in domestic politics all around the world. It is domestic politics that sets the ambition within which negotiators can negotiate.**

**108. One other thing. You have some authority in society because you know about health. But you have a lot more authority because people still trust you. Indeed yours are among the few professions that do still enjoy the public confidence. That is a priceless asset, and easier to lose than to regain.**

**109. That is why, as a matter of urgency, you should heed those like Ben Goldacre who have argued that some of you, and some of your institutions, have allowed yourselves to become entangled with forces, not least in the pharmaceutical industry, whose primary goal is not the public interest. Disentangle yourselves, now.**

**110. Link symptoms to cause; campaign for concrete outcomes, on climate and on health; make yourselves a stronger force for the public interest in politics; and shun Diana's gold. If you do that, and do it well, we can win this war.**

**111. One side of the war are those, all of us, who subscribe to the values I have described, for whom those values give meaning to our lives. Our goal is transformation, because that's what those values now require.**

**112. On the other side are the forces of a discredited business as usual. Those are the forces that for now hold sway. They represent a political culture in which our leaders and our elites can no longer**

**distinguish (in the words of my friend Tom Burke) between managing the headlines and running the country.**

- 113. A culture that divides society and governance into tribes and fiefdoms so that it is structurally impossible to deal with systemic problems that need systemic responses.**
- 114. A culture in which producers have become too close to those who set the policies that shape the markets for their products.**
- 115. A culture in which the path to the public interest is blocked by a pseudo-scientific ideology based on blind faith in markets that flourish in models and fail in real life.**
- 116. A culture that has succumbed to the seductive notion that we should surrender our will to decide the outcomes we want. If we have no will we do not need to strive, or to hold our rulers to account.**
- 117. But those rulers no longer have our confidence.**
- 118. At the heart of the city democracies of ancient Greece was the polis, the conversation among citizens to identify and secure the public good. We might now call it the body politic.**
- 119. Our body politic is dead.**
- 120. Asklepios knew that death is not always the end.**
- 121. To win our war we must raise the dead, revive the body politic. It's not too late. The body is still warm. We must do it together. We can't do it without you.**

122. And you are mortals too, made of the same stuff as the rest of us. We are all complicit in the condition in which we now find ourselves. We are all wounded, we are all bleeding.

123. T S Eliot was grappling with a more spiritual problem as he wrote *East Coker*, the second of his *Four Quartets*. But the surgeon he invoked, like Asklepios, straddled the divide between mortal and immortal realms. Like Asklepios the gift of life he gave cost him his own life.

124. These five lines from *East Coker* seem to me to point towards what I have been groping for over the last half hour:

*The wounded surgeon plies the steel  
That questions the distempered part;  
Beneath the bleeding hands we feel  
The sharp compassion of the healer's art  
Resolving the enigma of the fever chart.*

[4828 words]