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For days last September, wildfire smoke choked out the sun, and ash rained from the sky. I live in Los Angeles and did not experience the worst of last year's fire season, not by a long shot, but it was bad enough: I couldn't walk my dogs, ride my horse, or do any of the things that had kept me relatively sane and happy through those first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. Looking out my window, I could barely remember that the California I loved, the birds and palms and breezes, had ever existed at all.

The [Sixth Assessment Report](#) from the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a "[code red for humanity](#)" (1,2). The damage already wrought by climate change is severe and likely irreversible. Even if we managed to cut all emissions immediately, severe weather patterns including the Western wildfires and heat domes, the unprecedented winter storms in Texas, and the hurricanes and flooding in the South and East will persist for at least thirty years.

Health care, an energy- and waste-intensive industry, is a major contributor to greenhouse gases, [responsible for about 10% of United States emissions](#) (3). In the spring of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic led to a short-term drop in overall emissions, but it has ultimately and dramatically exacerbated the problem of climate change, with single-use masks and other disposables creating massive amounts of plastic pollution (4,5). Further, climate change worsens the pandemic, as communities with higher chronic exposure to air pollution have experienced worse COVID outcomes (6).

It's easy to feel helpless, but I take great comfort in action and constantly look for ways that I, as an individual, as a citizen, and as a hospital librarian, can act.

Health sciences librarians should:

- Use our connections. We work with clinicians, researchers, educators, and leaders in many fields and at many levels. When a nurse researcher I knew was named Executive Director of Environmental Stewardship for my health system, I reached out to her to offer targeted literature search assistance. I try to bring up climate issues in as many conversations as I can. This has helped me connect with others who are passionate about the environment, including a group of nurses who are starting a green team at one of the hospitals I serve.
- Use our skills. I send a [curated weekly search alert](#) to the Executive Director and to a multidisciplinary group of environmental leaders. Climate change conversations are rife with conflict and misinformation, and librarians are experts at making information accessible and actionable.
Our growing skills in data science and data management will be especially vital. My health system, Providence, [has committed to being carbon-negative by 2030](#), and our leaders recognize that commitments are meaningless without action and assessment. They rely on data to establish baselines and measure impacts.
- Learn. Librarians are lifelong learners, and we can become experts in sustainable healthcare. [Practice Greenhealth](#) is a good place to start.
- Educate. We must ensure that our colleagues, within and beyond the library, recognize climate change as the health crisis that it is. Editors from more than 200 medical journals recently posted [a joint editorial calling climate change the single greatest threat to global public health](#) (7). It is a concise, authoritative summary of the climate crisis and its health implications, and it should be promoted to all healthcare workers and leaders.

- Advocate. The power of large institutions to make change is undeniable. As a profession, we have decades of experience in advocacy, and we must tell our leaders and professional organizations that climate change matters to us. The Medical Library Association should evaluate waste and emissions generated by meetings, offices, and corporate travel, and should develop a clear and urgent plan to reduce these to zero.

The health impacts of water and food scarcity, poor air quality, and temperature extremes are borne, first and worst, by communities least responsible for climate change, and least able to adapt and mitigate. Those of us who care about health equity must stand for climate justice. It's easy to give in to helplessness and despair, but it is also easy—surprisingly so—to find opportunities to act in our homes, workplaces, and profession.

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