

Remarks Following a Roundtable Discussion on Climate Change and Public Health at Howard University April 7, 2015

The President. I just had the opportunity to have a terrific conversation with our outstanding new Surgeon General, Vivek Murthy, our EPA Administrator, Gina McCarthy, but also some incredible activists from different walks of life in the public health arena. And the discussion really centered around the fact that climate change is having an impact on our public health.

We've got nurses. We've got deans of medical schools. We have residents and public health officials, primary care physicians and moms, most importantly. And what we know is that the temperature of the planet is rising. And we know that in addition to the adverse impacts that may have when it comes to more frequent hurricanes or more powerful storms or increased flooding, we also know that it has an impact on public health.

We know that if there are more wildfires, a consequence of rising temperatures, that there are going to be more particulates in the air. We know that potentially, it extends the allergy season and can induce greater incidents of asthma or more severe incidents of asthma. We know that, potentially, as temperatures rise, that we're going to start seeing insect-borne diseases that are not traditional to North America start moving up from the south.

And so there are a whole host of public health impacts that are going to hit home. And the great thing about this conversation is to see all the work that's already being done by public health officials, the medical community, nurses, and families to start raising awareness around these issues.

The Pentagon has already said that climate change is a primary national security threat that we're going to face, and we are working with the Department of Defense to start preparing for that and mitigating for that. And a lot of our international policy and national security policy is centered around the very real concerns that that's going to raise.

But we also know that it's going to have an impact on our public health. And through the efforts of these individuals and organizations around the country, I think we're going to be able to start having an impact.

We'll just use the example of Charlotte Wallace, a pediatric nurse in Maryland for 18 years, treated kids with asthma. And as a nurse and a mom, she understands that climate change is going to be making a difference. Dr. Bryant-Stephens, who is a primary care physician, has seen firsthand how rising asthma rates, particularly in lower-income communities, can have a terrible impact.

So we've got to do better in protecting vulnerable Americans. Ultimately, though, all of our families are going to be vulnerable. You can't cordon yourself off from air or from climate.

And that's why today we're making more than 150 data sets on climate change in public health from agencies like the CDC open to the public. Companies across the country like Google and Microsoft plan to use the data to generate apps and tools that can help communities educate and protect themselves.

We have medical schools, including Howard, and public health schools pledging to train their students in the health impacts of climate change. And later this week, some of those educators will come to the White House to talk about how they're incorporating climate change into their teachings, into their curriculum. And this spring, we'll have a climate change and health summit at the White House.

So the bottom line is, we all need to do our part. Obviously, this administration has been aggressive in using the administrative authorities that we currently have to increase fuel efficiency standards to make sure that we are taking more carbon out of the emissions from our power plants. But we've got a lot more work to do if we're going to deal with this problem in an effective way and make sure that our families and our kids are safe.

And one of the key leaders in this is going to be our Surgeon General, Dr. Murthy. So, Vivek, why don't you say a few words.

U.S. Surgeon General Vivek H. Murthy. Sure. Well, thank you, Mr. President. Thank you, Administrator McCarthy. And my thanks to all of you who joined us here today.

We had a really enriching conversation today talking about the impact of climate change on public health from a number of different perspectives. It was very helpful to us. And I'd like to expand a little on what the President said and speak a little bit more about the relevance of climate change to clinicians and to patients.

We know that climate change means higher temperatures overall, and it also means longer and hotter heat waves. We also know that higher temperatures can mean worse air in cities and more smog and more ozone. We know that more intense wildfires will mean increased smoke in the air. And we know that earlier springs and longer summers mean longer allergy seasons.

If you put all of this together, this means that we have more people exposed to triggers that can cause asthma attacks, and more asthma attacks mean more days of school missed. They mean more days of work missed. They mean more costly trips to the doctor. And they most importantly mean more scary moments for parents and for children.

This is a personal issue for me because when I was young one of my favorite uncles—actually, he was very dear to me as a child—he died from a severe asthma attack. And it's also personal to me because I have cared for many patients over the years who have suffered from asthma and have seen firsthand how frightening it can be to suddenly be wheezing and fighting for every breath. Asthma can be very difficult for patients, but also for their families. And the impacts of climate change could make this situation worse.

Additionally, the longer summers and hotter heat waves will also expose more Americans to heat stroke and to heat stress, especially those who work in outdoor settings in industries like farming and construction. And it means that

elderly Americans will be even more vulnerable to respiratory distress and possible death from extreme heat, a problem that we already experience in our cities, particularly among the poor and minority populations who don't always have easy access to air conditioning.

An underlying principle of public health that I want to emphasize is that of prevention. Indeed, prevention of disease should be the driving force in our efforts to improve health in America. And whether it's promoting heart health through nutrition and physical activity or preventing disease outbreaks through vaccinations, prevention really is our goal, and that is true here with climate change as well.

As Surgeon General, one of my larger messages to our country is that we all have a stake in health. And as a result, we all have a responsibility to protect it. Health isn't just the responsibility of doctors and nurses and individual patients, it's a community responsibility. That means that businesses and faith groups, civic organization, schools and universities like this—all of American society has a hand in keeping our people healthy and preventing disease not just treating it, and in making sure that every American, no matter who they are or where they're from, has a shot at a healthy life.

So again, we're very grateful to have had this opportunity to speak with our community leaders here today. And we're excited to continue this conversation as we think about how to address some of the challenges that we now see with climate change and public health.

Thank you all very much.

The President. Last point I'll make, because Vivek touched on this—when we have, as Dr. Bryant-Stephens mentioned, a child who visits the emergency room six times because of asthma, there's a cost associated to that. We as a society pay for that. And even if the child has insurance, it is still resources that are being devoted to treating a child that could have avoided an emergency room visit if we took better care of the environment in which they were growing up.

And the reason I think this is important is because sometimes you'll hear the debate

when it comes to climate change that this is going to be too costly to address. Well, the fact of the matter is, we know that the costs of clean energy have rapidly come down and are increasingly competitive; that when—in historically, we have dealt with problems like smog or acid rain or the ozone, it's turned out that things are cheaper to fix than we anticipated, and—

[At this point, a cell phone rang.]

The President. Whoa! Who's calling there, Ms. Miller?

Moms Clean Air Force volunteer Eneshal Miller. My husband.

The President. Uh-oh. Tell your husband I'm in the middle of a press conference. [Laughter] I'm teasing.

So the—what has turned out typically is, is that the costs have been lower than anticipated. The benefits have been extraordinary. Hard to put a price on in some cases, and in some cases, we can be very clear about how much it costs. And when it comes to public health issues, when we're doing effective work on prevention, and we are preventing tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands of asthma

incidents, or we are preventing thousands of deaths as a consequence of asthma, that is something that we know is not only preventable when it comes to the individual, but it's something where we could be saving money as a society as a whole.

And so I want everybody to start recognizing the costs of inaction and recognize that the costs of inaction are even higher than the costs of action. In the same way that there are costs associated when you have severe drought or significant wildfires or the kinds of storm surges that we saw in Hurricane Sandy, well, there are public health costs as well. And we're ultimately going to be better off being proactive, getting out in front of this thing, as opposed to reactive where we pay a whole lot more in pain and suffering as well as in terms of trying to deal with the back end of the problem. All right?

Thank you, everybody.

NOTE: The President spoke at 3:31 p.m. In his remarks, he referred to Charlotte Wallace, pediatric nurse and sustainability coordinator, Anne Arundel Medical Center; and Tyra Bryant-Stephens, founder, Community Asthma Prevention Program of Philadelphia.

Statement on the 21st Anniversary of the Genocide in Rwanda

April 7, 2015

Twenty-one years ago today, a genocide began that would claim the lives of more than 800,000 Rwandan men, women, and children and mark the beginning of 100 days of horror for Rwanda's people. Today is a day to commemorate those who lost their lives, to honor the courage of those who risked their lives to save others, and to grieve with the Rwandan people. It is also a day to reaffirm what our common humanity demands: that we stand together to prevent mass atrocities and continue to do all we can to make good on the pledge of "never again." We also renew our commitment

to help finish the task of bringing to justice those who inflicted such tragedy upon such a beautiful land.

While we remain haunted by the genocide, we also draw hope and inspiration from the people of Rwanda, who are building a brighter future. We commend their determination to continue to make important progress toward healing old wounds and lifting people out of poverty. The United States will continue to work tirelessly in partnership with Rwanda and with other nations to help prevent such atrocities and advance dignity and peace for all.