

The Vital Sign

Category: Heat

written by Lesa R. Walker | August 30, 2023

The other day, our air-conditioner went out. We live in Austin, Texas, so the house quickly became an oven. Opening the windows and turning on fans didn't help, since the outdoor temperature was over 100 degrees F. The situation was not just an inconvenience—it required urgent action. We were able to get the air conditioner fixed, but it was expensive. We have resources. Others do not.

I am writing this story from newly air-conditioned comfort. But we've had a record-breaking 45 straight days with a high temperature above 100F. The news headlines read, "This has never happened in our lifetime." I realize I am relatively insulated, compared with many who are not. And, among "many" I include human beings, animals, plants, water, lands, and all that rely on both sun and rain. No one can say that this degree of heat is healthy. It is not. I see the Earth in distress.

Because of my medical training, I wonder who is responsible for treating the Earth? The Earth is now a patient, in need of health care. Who in health care is monitoring the Earth's vital signs? *Heat index, air quality index, sea level rise*. Who is monitoring Earth's symptoms? *Wildfires, hurricanes, flooding*. Who is identifying and lecturing about the agents of disease that are bringing about Earth's slow death? *The human population's reliance on fossil fuels, plastics, and over-extraction of resources*. Aren't we humans the invasive ones? What treatments are available to us to reduce Earth's morbidity? Are we prescribing the evidence-based treatment protocols identified by organizations such as Project Drawdown? Where are medical students, residents, and attending physicians presenting the history and physical of the Earth, the diagnostic imperatives, the case studies, the Grand Rounds?

We all have this one patient in common, the Earth, being wheeled into the Emergency Department on a gurney. The unique thing about this patient is that the Earth's health ultimately determines the health and well-being of all living things. So a triage approach means treating the Earth is paramount. We should all be talking about the Earth's health and care to our friends and family, to our colleagues, to our patients, to reporters, to the public.

Heat is the vital sign, warning us to act now for the health of us all.

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