

Why I care about Climate Change

By Mark Vossler, MD

**Evergreen Health Chairman of Department of Medicine
Medical Director of EH Heart and Vascular Clinic
Co-Chair WPSR Climate & Health Task Force**

The idea of a practicing physician being involved in issues of public health was introduced to me back when I was a medical student at University of Rochester, by a history professor, Dr. Ted Brown, who taught a course on the physician and society. I quickly realized that the conquest of many disease resulted not from what Dr. Brown called “the myth of the cliff,” a major new technological advance like a miracle drug or groundbreaking surgery but rather from improvements in living conditions and lifestyle factors. At that time in the mid 1980s the nuclear freeze movement was gathering momentum and realizing that nuclear war was THE threat to human survival for our time I joined PSR as a student member.

My activism waned for a bit during residency, fellowship, marriage, kids...all the stuff that gets us too busy to act all the time still vowing to act. It was at least 15 years ago when I read “End of Nature” by Bill McKibben and “Earth in the Balance” by Al Gore. I knew global warming was an issue of our time with threats to our species survival as large as nuclear weapons, but unlike the immediate threat of a bomb happening at any time it seemed temporally and geographically distant. My wife, Susan, was active in the sustainability movement when we lived in Portland. Her work on recycling and low impact living certainly influenced my thinking. I gradually came around to the notion that we can do more with less and be happy fulfilled individuals without leaving a trail of toxic waste in our wake.

A convergence of circumstances created a perfect storm in late summer, early fall of 2014. I was nudged by Dr. Bob Haynes, with whom I had practiced for the prior 12 years, to get more active in WPSR. I was invited to a focus group on health and climate change, where I met several members of the climate change task force. Susan and I went to a screening of “Disruption” and felt very afraid of leaving our three lovely teenage girls the world depicted in the movie. In an extremely short period of time I found myself helping write a position statement on the health risks of oil trains and hosting a monthly climate discussion group for neighbors and friends in my living room. The writing project led to me agreeing to co-chair the WPSR climate change task force and the group of radicals in my living room morphed into the Kirkland chapter of Citizens Climate Lobby.

We sometimes have difficulty accepting the political nature of our work and focus on small personally meaningful tasks like biking to work, turning down the thermostat or shutting off the lights. At other times we are paralyzed by the unimaginable awful reality of what world will be like if we fail to act. We must act soon and we must act decisively. I view my role in the movement as speaking truth to power, educating those in positions to make real change about the health risks of climate change and convincing them to take necessary action. I do this for my girls, Lydia, Ellen, and Claire in the hopes that their journey through life will be healthy and happy with clean air to breath and clean water to drink on a planet in healthy natural balance.