

00:09

I grew up in Bokaro Steel City in eastern India, an industrial townships surrounded by power plants and steel smelters. One of my fondest memories as a child was to stare in the evenings at the beautiful orange skies and flaring chimneys of the steel plant. Little did I know at that time that these were all classic signs of severe air pollution.

00:34

Cities like Bokaro were dubbed as the temples of modern India that propelled the country into the 21st century.

00:42

I now work at the intersection of environment, health and justice. I've been in the space for nearly two decades, and my experience tells that the negative impacts of industrialization have outweighed the good. I've also in my work come across several individuals and groups who, despite all odds, go beyond their call of duty to serve their communities. I find health care professionals working in polluted places, as one such group who strive to do everything they can to protect their patients and communities from risk. For example, Meena, a health worker from Korba district in central India. Her job is to provide maternal care to pregnant women. However, Meena lives in a region that is surrounded by coal and power plants and is considered among the top five critically polluted places in India. So Meena also gives advice on how to protect the newborn children from the dangers of air pollution.

01:48

Meena and thousands of other health workers in India and across the world apply a concept that has been with us since at least the fifth century BC when Hippocrates, the Greek physician, also considered as the father of modern medicine, wrote about the role of physicians in his book "Of the Epidemics." He said, and I quote, "The physician must be able to tell the antecedents, know the present and foretell the future. Must mitigate these things with two special objects in view with regard to disease. Namely, to do good or to do no harm."

02:34

The doctrine of "do no harm" forms the basis of the Hippocratic Oath, one of the oldest and most widely known codes of ethics. Now the recitation of the Hippocratic Oath may be symbolic today, but most health professionals adhere to it daily, as we have witnessed in the last two years of the COVID-19 crisis.

02:54

I am here to make a case for two things -- placing health at the heart of climate solutions and placing the philosophy of “first, do no harm” at the heart of all decisions beyond health, including those taken by our CEOs and politicians.

03:12

(Applause)

03:18

Now let me be clear about one fact. The climate crisis is a health crisis. It threatens our air, water, food, shelter, security, all the basics on which the human life depends. Burning of fossil fuels for electricity, heat or transport is a major driver for climate change and a main contributor to air pollution. Globally, air pollution causes seven million premature deaths each year. That's 13 deaths every minute. Way more than the death toll of COVID by the end of summer of 2021. And the poor and the marginalized are more severely impacted.

04:04

Now extreme climate events not only threaten people's health but health care's own infrastructure and capacity to respond. The deadly floods of 2018 in Kerala, in India, the state that I live in, forced hospitals to evacuate patients, suspend surgeries and critical care. Others faced power outages, many reported destruction of the entire stocks of vaccines and medical supplies. And similar experiences have been documented in other parts of the world.

04:34

Now there's also a paradox here, and with it an opportunity arises. While the health sector plays a central role in responding to the climate crisis, the sector itself contributes to nearly five percent of the net global greenhouse gas emissions and growing. Health care professionals understand the seriousness of their own climate footprint. In the last couple of years, we have seen an enormous momentum within the sector in charting a course towards transformative healthcare that starts with climate solutions.

05:10

This momentum is guided by a zero-emissions, climate resilience, and health equity road map. For example, the state of Chhattisgarh in India has solarized over 900 community health centers

and pledged to attain 100 percent solarization to provide energy access, thus anchoring the resilience of the community and protecting the most vulnerable. Last year, England's National Health Service began charting a course to zero emissions by 2045. This year, 40 institutions representing 3,000 hospitals in 18 countries followed suit and worked with Health Care Without Harm to decarbonize health care -- its buildings, its operations and supply chain -- in a race to zero. Doctors for Clean Air and Climate Action is mobilizing thousands of doctors across India on the issue of air pollution and health to advocate for better policies.

06:10

Time has come that we measure the advancement of our civilization through the metric of health rather than metric of wealth. But here also --

06:22

(Applause)

06:25

But here also lies one of our biggest roadblocks: it is impossible to have healthy people on a sick planet.

06:36

The blatant disregard for environment, which is entrenched in our current economic and social models, has pushed the natural world to its limits. Failure to ask basic questions like who is this business decision going to harm, or what is the impact of the current policy choice on the most marginalized or on the future generations has brought us to this crisis. COVID-19 is a clear example of our broken relationship with nature. It has also shown the deep interconnections between the health of the planet and human health. We need to urgently mend our relationship with the planet, and this is where the principle of "first, do no harm" in decisions becomes critical.

07:22

Now let me clarify one point here because I don't want any ambiguity. When I say "do no harm," I do not mean that we should not explore old and courageous solutions. We desperately need to be innovative in the face of crisis. But there is a lot of bad, wrongful, harmful and unjust behavior that happens knowingly, and that needs to stop.

07:50

(Applause)

07:56

The overarching theme of the Hippocratic oath is the idea that the individual who is reciting the pledge is making a personal dedication to ethical and committed care and putting their patients first. In Korba, Meena embodies this philosophy. She's doing her bit in protecting her community. However, that is not enough. The scale of challenges that we face today demands that all of us, individually and collectively, independently of our position, power, agency or resources adopt a similar dedication and commitment.

08:35

And as a first step, we must all include the principle of doing no harm in all decisions, big and small, for all present and future actions, and put the health of our planet and ours first.

08:54

Thank you.

08:55

(Applause)