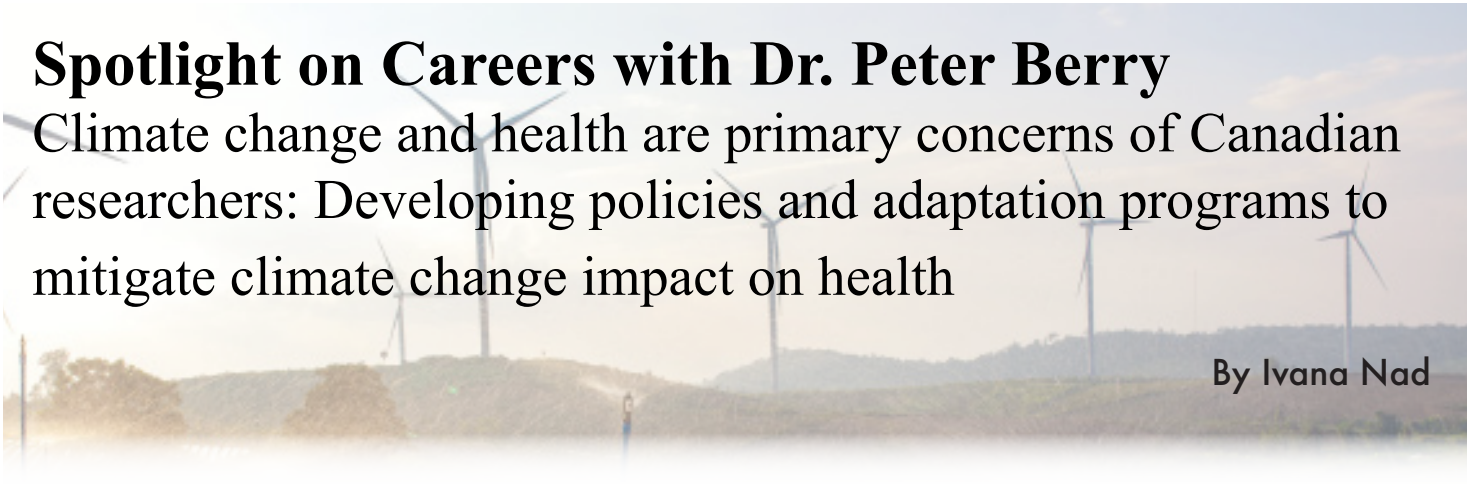

Spotlight on Careers with Dr. Peter Berry

Climate change and health are primary concerns of Canadian researchers: Developing policies and adaptation programs to mitigate climate change impact on health

By Ivana Nad

Dr. Peter Berry is a Senior Policy Analyst and Science Advisor to Health Canada, Climate Change and Innovation Bureau, Safe Environments Program, Ottawa, Ontario. He acquired his PhD degree at the University of Toronto in International Environmental Politics.

What is your current role? How did your PhD in environmental politics help you in developing strategies to protect public health in these times of extreme climate change?

I currently have two roles in the Climate Change and Innovation Bureau at Health Canada, where I've spent about 20 years now being in other similar roles. There is always something new to learn in the field of climate change. One of my roles is policy and program development where I provide advice to senior managers about the strategic directions needed to protect Canadians from the impacts of climate change. I was part of the Heat Health Program development launched in 2007, and the program guidance documents are still used today by health authorities. I also helped to develop tools and approaches for building climate resilient health-care systems. In terms of the research component of my role, I've done quite a lot of scientific research on climate and health. We are learning more and more about the impacts of climate change on health but also about different approaches and ways to deal with it. It is very gratifying because public health officials are seeking this information for their local and regional programs. I am also a supervisor for new students and researchers, which is very exciting.

My interest is always in the interface of science and policy. My PhD program in international environmental politics really provided information about importance of knowledge development for making progress in addressing environmental issues like climate change. That was the reason why I gravitated toward policy making and evidence-based research. I was very fortunate to be able to work on these areas while I've been working at Health Canada.

What were the key events that lead you to pursue your current position?

I've been in the same kind of position for quite some time now with Health Canada. After graduating, I came right into what was called the Environmental Health Directorate at Health Canada. I was a policy analyst on the broad range of issues, like air and water quality. A new manager was just starting a new office at, what was used to be called the Climate Change and Health Adaptation Capacity Building Program, and he invited me to work there. That was the key event that led me there but many things along the way helped to sustain my interest for this specific area of work I' have been doing.

Can you tell us a little bit about your work as a technical expert at Health Canada's Climate Change and Health Adaptation Capacity Building Program?

It's a really interesting and important program because the office is funding ten local or regional health authorities to undertake climate change and health assessments and to develop adaptation measures. For example, Northwest territories did an assessment engaging a number of communities. Northwestern Health Unit in

Ontario brought together several health units to do a broad study on climate change and health and some of the measures that are needed. It is a very diverse program including Indigenous population as well. We modeled it on the United States CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) "Climate-resilient states and cities" initiative so it has been a great experience cooperating and exchanging information with the colleagues from the US. As a researcher with an expertise in undertaking climate change assessments, developing adaptation measures, and building climate change resistant facilities and health-care systems, I've been providing advice to a number of partners with individual projects. We also identify people who are most at risk from climate change impact and develop practical measures for protection from heat waves, wildfires, hurricanes, and such.

What is the most exciting aspect of your work at the Climate Change and Innovation Bureau?

Much needs to be done to prepare for the impacts of climate change and reduce their risk on human health. That keeps me motivated. We've felt the impact of wildfires in British Columbia and Atlantic Canada most recently. The fact that we can develop effective adaptations makes me very excited. We can also work very closely with a lot of partners inside and outside of Canada to develop important scientific information. New data, methods, tools and frameworks can really push things forward. This includes students and new researchers. Recently we've been working with colleagues at WHO (World Health Organization) contributing to a new framework for building a climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable facilities. Three of our recent graduates were leading authors of the national climate change health assessment and they really contributed to that report.

What do you hope to be the legacy of your overall work?

A very gratifying aspect of my job is how the interest and importance of climate change and health have risen among public health officials, health-care providers, civil society organizations and Canadian population over a number of years. Today, it is considered to be a top health issue that we need to focus on. Seniors and children, people living in poverty, people with chronic illnesses are really affected by climate change and we need to establish proper measures to protect most vulnerable members of the society. I realized my most important role moving forward will be in building the capacity for sustaining health of these people and developing courses and training programs, as well as engaging with students and providing support to them as they get into this important field. A few days ago, I gave a lecture to 900 clinical climate responders for the public health officials course organized by the Columbia University and Health Canada partners.

What advice would you like to give to students interested in climate change, health and environmental politics? How can they contribute to this field 10 years from now?

It's a very broad field when you think about it. It's not only about health risk but about actual policies, programs, and adaptation measures. There is scope for students from a wide range of fields to get involved. I think it's very exciting and dynamic field with the opportunity to work on the most vital and important issues for the future of humanity, in collaboration with great people dedicated to this issue. I really enjoyed that. Indigenous partners are also committed to new, exciting innovative research developing adaptations within the Indigenous communities. There is a sense of purpose – reaching out to people, building networks within and outside the government.

This area is based on robust scientific evidence. We are seeing new developments. Some elements of climate change phenomena are starting to combine, such as the elements of heat waves with wildfires are an increased threat to people's health. We need to understand these elements and we need a plan to mitigate that. Having new researchers looking at these important issues in a timely manner will really help with solutions because we need a quick response to these upcoming threats. We have some time to adapt our response but in the future, we will need to have a quick response systems to protect the health of Canadians.