Why I Care About Climate Change

By Michael Soman, MD, MPH

In 1994 I took my first environmental science class. I was aboard the SS Universe and my wife and I were serving as ship physicians for 600 college students, 60 faculty members and families and over 200 crew members from around the world. The professor did a fantastic job of driving home the impact of our species on the planet, in particular the impacts since the industrial revolution and those related to the rapid explosion in human population.

At that time, Sara and I were traveling with our then 14- and 11-year-old children. We had already been in a gratifying family practice setting for years. I was deeply struck that there was a blindingly bright connection between what I took care of every day in my practice, related to prevention and management of acute and chronic illness and pursuit of wellness, with the concepts of prevention and healing of both acute and chronic insults to our environment and our planet.

While I maintained this interest, continued to learn, I had relatively minimal involvement in climate issues due to competing needs related to work. I was not really able to pursue this interest in depth and with passion until I retired in July of 2014. At that time, I had been the President of Group Health Physicians and the Medical Director of the Group Health delivery system for six years. In those capacities, I was responsible for all aspects of the work and performance of 1200 medical professionals caring for over 400,000 patients. I had always been oriented toward service in my work-life, and I knew that fulfilling that need to continue to serve might be a real challenge for me in retirement.

Luckily for me, even before I actually left Group Health I had become deeply involved in and committed to the environmental movement, especially in efforts to minimize negative impacts on our climate. I went to Washington, DC to lobby congress on climate issues before I retired, and it was a relatively straightforward path to become a Climate Task Force member of Washington Physicians for Social Responsibility (WPSR). I have been to Olympia and to Vancouver, Wa to speak out on behalf of our environment and our climate and have been involved with several WPSR initiatives as well. It has been a great pleasure to work with other committed health care professionals in attempting to assure that concerned, organized medical professionals have a voice in these discussions.

My children are now 35 and 33 years old, and my grandson is 2 1/2 years old. As polio vaccine pioneer and physician Dr. Jonas Salk said, “Our greatest obligation is to be good ancestors.” Doing this work on behalf of our planet feels critically important and personally very satisfying to me.