

Jill Denny: What Palliative Care Can Teach Us About Climate Change

A few years ago, Jill Denny, MD, found herself returning to the same question:

"What is palliative care doing about climate change?"

At the time, she couldn't find much of an answer.

"We kept thinking, palliative care is so relevant to this topic," she says. "Why is nobody talking about it, or at least not in an organized way?"



That question sparked conversations with colleagues who were wondering the same thing. Those conversations eventually grew into Hospice and Palliative Professionals for Planetary Health, a community of clinicians exploring what palliative care can contribute to discussions about climate change, health, and the future. For Denny, the connection feels natural. Much of her career has been spent helping patients and families navigate uncertainty, adapt to change, and make difficult decisions when life didn't unfold as expected. Those same skills, she believes, have something to offer as communities grapple with a changing climate.

Bringing a Palliative Care Perspective

"Our secret sauce in palliative care is the way we communicate with patients," she says. "We're very prognosis-aware. We're constantly asking: What do we expect to happen? And given those expectations and those hopes, what do we do now?"

To her, those questions are just as relevant outside the clinic. Communities facing extreme heat, wildfire smoke, flooding, and other climate-related challenges are grappling with uncertainty and trying to make decisions in the face of it. Palliative care also offers a model for collaboration. Physicians, nurses, social workers, chaplains, and others work together because patients' needs extend beyond medicine alone.

"The climate discussion has to be multidisciplinary too," she says. "You can't do it just from a political angle, just from a scientific angle, just from an economic angle. It has to be all of the above."

She also sees parallels in the way palliative care helps people process grief. In her clinical work, she has spent years supporting patients and families through moments when their understanding of the future suddenly changed.

"We talk about the feeling of somebody's world changing and that a horizon seems much closer than it might have even a week ago," she says. "There's so much grief associated with our changing planet and the way that our futures may not look the way that we're hoping for them to look."

Those experiences have shaped the way she thinks about climate conversations today. Rather than avoiding difficult truths, she believes people benefit from acknowledging uncertainty while still finding reasons for hope and action.

The Switch That Flipped

Denny didn't always think of climate change as part of her professional life. Then came 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic, the George Floyd protests, and severe wildfire smoke in the Pacific Northwest all seemed to converge at once.

"I read some article that I can't even put my finger on anymore," she recalls. "It was like a switch flipped. I thought, 'Well, I can't unsee that.'"

What had previously felt like separate issues suddenly seemed connected.

"All these pieces had fallen into place and I realized I wasn't doing anything about it," she says. "I started asking myself, 'What can I learn? What can I do? How can I make this part of my work?'"

Those questions eventually led her to the University of Colorado School of Medicine's Diploma in Climate Medicine. Of the program's five certificates, the Sustainable Healthcare Certificate left the strongest impression.

"It really blew me away," she says.

The course introduced her to healthcare's environmental footprint and helped her better understand the connections between healthcare delivery, waste, supply chains, and sustainability. Some lessons have stayed with her long after the course ended. Recently, while talking with someone at her gym about plastics, she found herself repeating a phrase she first heard during the program: *"Plastics never go away. They just get smaller."*



Jill Denny and classmates at the National Center for Atmospheric Research during the Foundations in Climate Medicine Certificate.

"It's been three years since I heard that, and I still repeat it," she says.

What continues to strike her is how readily healthcare professionals engage with the topic.

"Almost every physician recognizes how much waste exists in healthcare," she says. "When you start talking about it, people immediately see opportunities for improvement."

Even during our interview, climate change had a way of making itself known. At one point, Denny's phone overheated and abruptly shut down, forcing a pause in our conversation while she cooled it in an air-conditioned car. Laughing at the irony, she described the moment as "our future in 3D."

Staying Engaged for the Long Haul

One of Denny's most memorable insights comes from her years in palliative care. She believes people sometimes feel pressure to remain immersed in climate concerns all the time, but sustainable engagement requires balance.

"It can be spiritually exhausting to maintain a constant awareness of mortality," she says. "And I think the same can be true of climate change."

She compares it to the way a deep-sea mammal surfaces for air. Most of the time, people live their lives surrounded by family, work, hobbies, friendships, and ordinary routines. Occasionally, they surface, confront difficult realities, take them in, and then return to the deeper waters of everyday life.

"I don't think you have to have the climate crisis at the forefront of your mind every minute of the day," she says. "In fact, I don't think it's necessarily healthy for most of us to do that." Finding joy, she argues, isn't separate from the work. It's part of what sustains it. "There's a long history of people doing resistance work who talk about the need to find joy in the work," she says. "I think that is an essential piece of it."



Jill and fellow graduating Climate Medicine Diplomates at Disaster City in College Station, TX during the Certificate in Disaster Resilience and Response.



Small group exercises, such as preparing oral testimony, are a typical part of Diploma courses.

When asked what she wishes more people understood about climate change, Denny doesn't hesitate. "I can't tell you how many times people have asked me, 'How does climate change affect our health?'"

Her answer often starts with whatever is happening around them, whether that's a heat wave, wildfire smoke, flooding, or another extreme weather event. These experiences aren't separate from health, she says. They shape who gets sick, who suffers, and who is most vulnerable. "The cars we drive, the way that we power our homes, and the buildings that we build are all contributing to the way that we experience our health in our bodies."

For clinicians considering climate and health training, Denny's advice is simple: "Jump into the Diploma with both feet."

She credits the program not only for the knowledge it provided, but also for the community and relationships that grew from it. She also encourages healthcare professionals not to wait for someone else to start the conversation.

"Look around your community and see what's already being done that you can join," she says. "And if your field isn't talking about this the way that it should, start talking."

A question about palliative care's role in climate change ultimately led to new collaborations, a growing professional community, and a new way to apply the skills she developed throughout her career.

And when she's not thinking about climate communication, healthcare sustainability, or planetary health, Denny can often be found working on crossword puzzles. She and her husband have had six puzzles accepted by The New York Times, five of which have already been published. It's a fitting hobby for someone who enjoys finding connections, whether among words in a grid or ideas that help people make sense of a changing world.



Jill with her crossword contractor collaborator husband and her children.

Learn More About the Diploma in Climate Medicine



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