

Thinking about cyclones, floods and protecting our climate

by Dr Hong Yinghui Lois, Family Physician, Editorial Team Member (Team B)

The rain fell all night, sometimes in a steady patter, sometimes in sheets that struck the zinc with muted roars. We woke to a gloomy Easter morning; it was still pouring. The grass around our house had disappeared in a pond. The electricity was not working. Just another rainy season day in Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste.



Dr Lois Hong and her colleague Dr Joaquina joining a government-led mobile clinic to provide care to communities affected by flash flooding in Timor-Leste.
Image courtesy of Maluk Timor, Dili

I wish I could say this rarely happens. But Cyclone Seroja was just the latest of a series of tropical cyclones that have occurred with increasing frequency in recent years. Timor-Leste experienced merely its fringe; the cyclone itself flattened tens of thousands of homes in neighbouring countries.

The Indonesian Meteorology, Climatology and Geophysics Agency attributed the increased frequency of cyclones to climate change. One reason Cyclone Seroja (and its ensuing flash floods and landslides) was so devastating is that the affected communities rarely experienced cyclones before the last couple of decades; they were not adapted to withstand them.

Grimly rinsing mud from the precious bottles of anti-retroviral medication in my NGO's HIV clinic, I thought, "Climate change just got real".

Climate-related disasters (from extreme weather changes) are not a "poor country problem"—there's footage aplenty showing similar scenes of devastation from developed Western Australia. It's not a stretch to imagine similar scenes unfolding in our small, low-lying island state. You don't need to see the water level reach your sofa to believe it either; floods in Malaysia have already sent food prices higher this year.

From 29 March to 4 April 2021, flash floods and landslides ravaged Timor-Leste as Tropical Cyclone Seroja swept pass. Almost 9,000 people lost their homes. More than 25,000 households were affected in some way: a valuable motorcycle ruined; broken pipes and fallen electricity poles cut off water and power for weeks; families had to defecate in the open while trying to repair plumbing. It was the worst flooding Timor-Leste had experienced since the 1970s.

What can a GP do?

My suggestions:

1 Cheer up.

Most sustainable lifestyle choices also just happen to confer cardiovascular benefit. For example:

- Less-processed foods (such as whole grains) are less resource-intensive than processed foods.

- Plant-based foods are less resource-intensive than animal-based foods (because you need more water and energy to produce a kilo of beef than a kilo of mushrooms).
- Order just enough food (Singapore generates more than 700 million kilograms of food waste a year).

- Walk or run or cycle to work (if your timetable and workplace facilities allow it).

2 Give sustainable, practical health advice.

As we implement these lifestyle changes for ourselves, we can realistically support our patients in doing likewise.

3 Get with the Plan (the Singapore Green Plan 2030).

The Green Plan identifies 5 key areas for sustainable development in Singapore, with trackable and realistic targets. Check out greenplan.gov.sg which is full of specific, context-appropriate guidelines for individuals and businesses. A quick Google search reveals plenty of ways to get involved: e.g. NParks, the OneMillionTrees movement and plasticlite.sg. If you run your own clinic, can you use natural lighting and ventilation?

4 Follow the conversation, not just the politics.

The conversation on climate change and sustainability is nuanced and complex. One Health (the interface between human, animal

and environmental health) is a good place to begin as it examines issues ranging from emerging zoonoses to antimicrobial resistance. The Lancet maintains a whole journal on planetary health, which "broadens health research to include the external systems that sustain or threaten human health". *The Lancet Planetary Health* poses fascinating questions such as "Which weather conditions are linked to increases in cardiac admissions?" and "How might urban planning affect rates of dementia?"

If you've had enough of reading scientific articles (no matter how interesting), Sir David Attenborough's *Our Planet* series and Netflix movie *Breaking Boundaries: The Science of Our Planet* explore these issues with breath-taking, sometimes heart-

breaking cinematography and narration.

5 Think global and count the cost.

I don't mean to incite climate anxiety about global warming — we already have enough to be anxious about. But perhaps we need to count, not just the monetary value of our transactions, but their environmental impact as well. I have friends who use soap nuts and are vegan for the sake of the environment. Perhaps the rest of us can begin by taking some small steps towards protecting and sustaining our environment, including our climate. I've never been able to watch rain fall in quite the same way since experiencing the floods last year in Timor Leste.

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