

Gabriela Alcalde:

Climate change is one of the really big determinants of health. It affects different people differently. And just like all health issues, people of color, people that live in very rural places, people that experience poverty suffer the most climate change impact on health.

Announcer:

On this episode of Sustainable Healthcare, how our changing climate disproportionately affects our most vulnerable citizens.

Tim Doak:

Welcome podcast listeners to this edition of Sustainable Healthcare. I'm your host, Tim Doak. Sustainable Healthcare is part of our new, Healthy, Happy, and Wise podcast series designed to heal, inspire, and inform you. Thanks for being here. In this podcast series, we ask you to join us to explore ways to improve the health of our communities by improving our climate sustainability.

Our guest today will help us understand a key piece of this puzzle, health equity, and how that intersects with climate change. I'm pleased to be joined today by Gabriela Alcalde, executive director of the Elmina B. Sewall Foundation, as well as co-chair of the Maine Climate Council's Equity Leadership Group. She holds a doctorate in public health and has spent her career advancing health equity and social justice. Gabriela, thanks so much for being here.

Gabriela Alcalde:

Thank you for having me, Tim.

Tim Doak:

So let's jump right in with a discussion about health equity. That may be a term that some folks are familiar with, but I bet many aren't. Can you explain to us what we mean by health equity?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Yeah, and just to start by saying that if you ask 10 people, 10 people will give you 10 different definitions.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Gabriela Alcalde:

So I will give you my understanding of it, but it's certainly a difficult concept to grasp. Health equity, I think in the simplest way for me to put it is both a process and the state of everyone having access to, and experience of being able to achieve the best health possible for them. And because the majority of our health is determined by factors outside of the individual, meaning outside of your genetic makeup, your biology, even outside of your diet and exercise, and even outside of healthcare, right?

Tim Doak:

Right.

Gabriela Alcalde:

Health equity really requires that we pay attention to where people live, where they work, where they play. So the context where people live is just as important for your health equity, if not actually more important than anything that an individual themselves alone could do.

Tim Doak:

So social and environmental factors absolutely play into a person's prospective health or access to healthcare?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Yes. And if I could add one more piece, because I think a lot of times people think of equity as equality. They sound similar, they seem similar, but it's actually very different. In fact, I often say I use the comparison between the two to explain equity. Equality is if you have a pie, you split it into equal pieces.

Tim Doak:

Yes.

Gabriela Alcalde:

With equity, you have a more complicated assessment. You have to think about who ate last, who might have a higher need for calories, who might never have had pie in their life, who is not going to eat for the next few hours. You start thinking about each person's circumstances and you apply them to that. So you're not going to end up dividing that pie up in equal slices.

Tim Doak:

I think that's very interesting and an important distinction here that in order to provide equal quality care to the masses may mean a disproportionate effort to serve certain individuals or certain populations more than others.

Gabriela Alcalde:

That's a really helpful analysis, and I think that's true. We can set universal goals, meaning we want everybody to have X, Y, and Z, but the way we get there is going to mean that we have to do different interventions and create different activities for each of those populations because they're not starting from the same place.

Tim Doak:

And maybe even different vehicles to deliver those services-

Gabriela Alcalde:

Absolutely, yes.

Tim Doak:

... different approaches as well. So let's layer climate on top of that. So how is climate change playing a role in health equity?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Well, climate change is one of the really big determinants of health, one of those things outside of your direct control that affects your health directly and indirectly. It affects different people differently. So

back to that equity piece. And just like all health issues, unfortunately, people of color, people that live in very rural places, people that experience poverty suffer the most climate change impact on health.

You have things like respiratory health concerns, concerns about excessive heat, natural catastrophes, and the ability to be resilient or to bounce back from that or handle them. Food insecurity, agricultural work, workplace safety for people who work outdoors, like agricultural and others, and very real mental health impact from climate change. And we're seeing that becoming a much more known and talked about issue, the climate change despair, and so many other health impacts that are resulting from climate change right now.

Tim Doak:

Sure. Sure. Certainly we're seeing that in the state of Maine in particular. So as we think about the interconnectedness between climate change and health equity, how well do you think people understand that notion that there is this connection between these two?

Gabriela Alcalde:

I think most people that work in health equity and maybe most people that work in climate change get it. I think outside of that, it's a challenging ... They're two individually challenging concepts, so then you put them together and it becomes even more challenging to fully understand.

So I think that people who are living those realities of climate change impact on their lives, whether they call it health equity or not, they know it. They're experiencing, they know that their lives are made more challenging. Whether it's somebody living on the coast and they're seeing their land erode, they might have their properties going down in value, certainly flooding. We had so much damage here from the recent storms. That is climate change right now.

Tim Doak:

Sure.

Gabriela Alcalde:

We have people who are experiencing increased respiratory problems. We have older adults living alone. With the loss of power that we have in the state, not everybody can afford or manage a generator or dealing with what that requires. So people like that, they're experiencing it. Whether they use the term of health equity or not in terms of the climate change impact they're having, that is what it is and they have the lived experience for sure.

Tim Doak:

Sure. I think we all experience climate change through our own individual and unique lens, and we certainly can appreciate how that change is impacting us personally. We may watch the news and see, okay, this storm has impacted infrastructure on the coast, and can easily relate to how that may be impacting fisheries or the working waterfront. But I think it's different to think about this in terms of it impacting marginalized populations. I think that's something that we don't ... It isn't top of mind for many people, and yet it's very real. It's significant.

And the example you gave, you think of this individual who may be all alone, who may be elderly, may not have family close by, may be impoverished and not have the means to purchase that generator. And how are we helping, how are we reaching that person? Climate change is impacting them in a very meaningful way different than it may be impacting you or I.

Gabriela Alcalde:

Absolutely. And I think something I want to bring into the conversation is just we tend to want to address issues in a very fragmented way, like I do this, you do that. We will not mix those two issues and everybody has a specialty. This is a global issue, both health equity and climate change. So the interconnectedness, the interdependence, I think is really critical.

And another thing I would say here along with the disproportionate impact is when you think globally, the US and other wealthy nations disproportionately contribute to climate change.

Tim Doak:

Certainly do.

Gabriela Alcalde:

And yet it is the poorer nations that suffer the greatest impact. That global dynamic plays out within the US as well. So those who are wealthier within the US, contribute greater, more into climate change, yet they have the ability to buffer themselves for now from the impacts. Whereas people who are more exposed through their work, because of socioeconomic impact, because of health vulnerabilities, because of geographic location, they do not have that privilege. And so we really have to address this from a health equity perspective because the burden is not equal across.

Tim Doak:

I think that's a very, very important point. So if we think of how do we educate people about this, how do we get this more top of mind, and I think beyond that, how do we catalyze action?

Gabriela Alcalde:

I think that this is a place where healthcare can play an important role. Healthcare providers are trusted individuals. When you see polls about who people trust, healthcare providers are still one of the few within the shrinking number of people that are trusted. So I think that it's really important for healthcare systems and healthcare providers to actually draw that line between climate change and health impact and to call out climate change as a health issue, as a health determinant of health. I think that sort of relational education is much more impactful than ...

I mean, I think general education is very important too, but when you have someone you trust with your health and they are telling you, "Hey, the climate change that you hear on the news and it sounds like it's far away, it's somewhere else or maybe far away in the future, it's happening right now and it's having an impact on people's health, maybe on your health." We need credible messengers, and I think healthcare providers can play a really pivotal role in that.

Tim Doak:

I think that is so, so very important. So if you're a healthcare provider working independently or for a health system or a hospital out there, how should you be thinking of this? What should you be doing in your everyday practice to ensure that we're reaching the right folks and that we're able to better understand and adapt to the specific needs they may have?

Gabriela Alcalde:

I think there are a lot of tools out there for healthcare providers to assess health status, concerns, challenges. I think integrating some question around your environment, where you live, how you live, asking a question about have you experienced anything because of weather related, because people might not think about it as climate change.

So you've got to, I think one of the important things is to translate the terminology of climate change and health equity to language that people actually can relate to in their own lives. So ask about how did you manage with the storms? Did you have power? Were you able to keep your food, the food spoilage, right? These are all part of that socioeconomic piece around social determinants of health.

So I think all the efforts around asking around context and really thinking, again, reminding ourselves that even the best healthcare system cannot address the wellbeing of a population unless they also take care and address the community conditions because most of our health is coming from outside of that interaction in the clinic.

Tim Doak:

Right, absolutely. So we've touched on some of these things, but if we focus specifically on Maine, what do you think are some of the health equity and social justice challenges that Maine, and maybe even more broadly, New England face in relation to long-term climate change?

Gabriela Alcalde:

I think any coastal community, obviously that's a big issue. The Gulf of Maine is warming faster than other bodies of water around the world. So that's a huge impact on our industries as well. So as we just said, socioeconomic social determinants of health are a huge part of health outcomes, so we need to pay attention to that. If you know that you're in a coastal community or in a community where people really depend on fisheries, you want to talk about that.

The infrastructure in Maine, certainly the housing stock, we have very old homes-

Tim Doak:

We do

Gabriela Alcalde:

... that don't have adequate heat or cooling, and we mentioned that earlier with the older population. We have a demographic of much larger older population than in other states.

Tim Doak:

Or insulation, right?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Absolutely, yes. And the housing is also really expensive. So that's the other thing. So we have a growing unhoused population. They are exposed to the elements more than anybody. So we have people who are unhoused. We have lack of transportation. It's really kind of impossible to get around in Maine unless you have a car. And of course that is contributing to climate change. Maine has a high poverty rate, a large older population that is vulnerable to the warming climate. We have labor sectors that depend on and interact with nature, and those sectors are changing.

Tim Doak:

Right. So it's pretty significant. Do you feel then that Maine is ahead of or behind the curve if we think about understanding and addressing these issues compared with other regions of the US or even other regions globally?

Gabriela Alcalde:

I think that's hard to answer, and I'll take it by parts. I think with health equity, one thing I would call back is one, Maine has one of the largest white populations and-

Tim Doak:

The oldest and whitest state in the nation, quite literally.

Gabriela Alcalde:

Very much so, right? It's like every year you're competing with Vermont I think, but right now we're at the top on that. And Maine had the biggest racial disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic. So that's something that always is front and center for me when I consider the question of health equity. When our system was tested as we were all tested globally with COVID, we did not do well, our communities of color, our Indigenous Wabanaki communities. Some of them did amazingly well because they took care of themselves, but speaking of the state as a whole and the infrastructure, I think on a health equity perspective, Maine is not doing as well as it could be.

I do think that Maine is ahead in terms of having state-level climate change plans. Maine Won't Wait has been engaging people in communities and across sectors. And that's an important thing to do. This is a cross-sector, everybody, all hands on deck kind of situation. So I think having that political will and commitment is really important. Maine Won't Wait has made equity a central aspect of it.

Tim Doak:

It has.

Gabriela Alcalde:

And so that gives me a lot of hope, and I think we're on the right track. However, as I said, because of the deep racial disparities in the state, we have a lot of work to do on the health equity and the disproportionate impact on people of color, very rural, older adults, high poverty rates.

Tim Doak:

So speaking of COVID, a bright spot within that, certainly there's always more we can do, but from our perspective, something that we were actually quite proud of that we think happened as good as it potentially could was our response to vaccinations, particularly in the city of Portland and working with cultural ambassadors to reach the right communities to understand their needs, to organize transportation, in some cases even adapting aspects of our facilities to ensure that they had the right privacy to embrace some cultural preferences.

We think we did a pretty good job with that, and we're trying to replicate that work as we think more broadly about our response to climate and how can we have voices at the table representing these various communities and ensuring that we're understanding needs and crafting responses that are most responsive to those needs.

Gabriela Alcalde:

That's such an important question. I think a lot of times when we talk about problems in general, challenges in general, we want a solution. And oftentimes we think of technical solutions or technological solutions. That's certainly the case in climate change. The reality is we got here because of mindsets and cultural norms and attitudes. So we need to make change at the cultural level.

So I really appreciate you naming the different cultures have different approaches, different norms, different beliefs and behaviors, and we need to work within that cultural dimension. We need to work within that cultural language. And I think that helps tremendously with health equity because we all

understand health. We understand illness and injury differently. We understand what family and community means differently. So we have to understand to be conversant with each other.

With climate change, globally, there's a growing recognition that the way that Indigenous communities care for the environment, steward land and water is the gold standard. It is better than any technical or technological approach that we have tried to come up with. So I think we need to lean into that from a climate change perspective. We have amazing efforts happening in Maine, both with Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, but we have so much to learn from our Wabanaki partners.

Tim Doak:

We do.

Gabriela Alcalde:

So I am very hopeful when I think about just in the five years that I have been in Maine, how much more awareness there is about the amazing work that Wabanaki and other Indigenous communities are doing in Maine and beyond globally. I think with health equity similarly, we need to have cross-cultural conversations where we don't assume one way is the right way, but rather we enter with curiosity. Because we're in a place that needs some problem-solving, and that's going to require imagining and being creative and thinking beyond what we've done in the past.

Tim Doak:

Absolutely. That's so important. And there's been great conversation with respect to some nature-based solutions at the Maine Climate Council work group meetings over the last many months. And a lot of really turning back to some of that original wisdom from our Indigenous populations here and how they were really the consummate stewards of the land and how can we return to similar approaches as we think about a better future for all here.

Gabriela Alcalde:

Yeah.

Tim Doak:

So what would solving this problem look like for the state of Maine, or I think at the very least, what's the best we can do in the shortest amount of time?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Well, I think if I had the answer for that-

Tim Doak:

Tough question.

Gabriela Alcalde:

That is a tough question. I think I'm going to go back to the idea that there's so much attention, energy, and resources applied to technical approaches. And this is not to say that those should not be happening. Absolutely, they should be happening and they're necessary. But unless we change how we live, how we engage with each other as a species, as a society, how we engage with the only planet we have, with our systems, our sectors, our communities, we really can't attend to the existential challenge that climate justice is. It's going to require culture change.

It's going to require that we engage with each other in different ways. It's about changing things that we ourselves have created, that we invented. So it's very doable. I mean, that's where I get hope is, well, we got into this mess ourselves, so we can undo this. It is a choice that we can make. It starts with information. I think, again, the education that you talked about, making sure that we build those messages into everything, that that is a lens that we use for everything, both equity and climate change. That is just a part of how we need to engage with each other right now.

I think we also have to listen to communities who are disproportionately experiencing climate change already, and to view their experience as evidence. We often talk about data and evidence as if it's something that requires clinical trials and whatnot. And that is one type of evidence, but there is other types of evidence, and that is community knowledge, that is cultural knowledge and wisdom. We have that data. We have to think in terms of we. There is no escaping climate change.

And in health equity, when there are groups who are affected, everybody ends up being affected. And that's why earlier I said, those who are privileged, those who have the resources for now, are able to maybe have some resilience, but that's not going to hold out forever. So we really need to start thinking collectively and acting collectively and understand that there is no escaping our interdependence. If any of us suffers, it affects all of us. So I think that is a vital and essential mind shift that it is not your idea, my idea, his idea, their idea. It is all of us, and we need to come together for that.

Tim Doak:

It's our idea. Yeah, absolutely. So how do we get the right voices at the table?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Relationships, trusting relationships. I think we need to recognize that coming to, first of all, which table, right?

Tim Doak:

Right.

Gabriela Alcalde:

There can't be just one table. So systems and institutions, agencies, we need to be curious about what tables are already set and build relationships so that we're invited in. And when we're invited in, we need to listen. We need to do way more listening than talking.

Tim Doak:

We do. We do.

Gabriela Alcalde:

And when we do invite people into the tables that we have set, we need to understand what barriers might exist to people's participation, whether it is logistical, so we need to address that. Or maybe it's there's a cost, so we need to address the financial cost of participation. Maybe it's cultural, and so we need to attend to our cultures again. I mean, it all comes down to culture.

We need to attend to, are we making people feel included? Are we making people feel psychologically safe when they're in a space that they can actually speak up, that they can push back on especially people with high status. So how even when you go and talk to your healthcare provider, there's a hierarchy there. So it's through relationships that we can actually get to a place where we can speak more frankly to each other. And this is a time for candor.

Tim Doak:

This is a time for candor, and it's a time for listening. To your point, I had an old client back in the day that told me, "God gave you two ears and he gave you one mouth, and they should be used in that proportion."

Gabriela Alcalde:

I love that.

Tim Doak:

It's truly words it's to live by. And I think listening is an important part of this message. How do we listen? And back to the comment about the table, maybe it's not my table that folks should be invited to, maybe I need to be included in other people's table. So such great information. So in summation, is there anything else you'd like to leave us with, any other point that's important in this conversation?

Gabriela Alcalde:

Well, I really love your point about listening. And so I think what I would close with is to say we do need to listen more than we speak. We need to listen, especially to those we don't normally interact with. And we need to listen beyond humans. We need to listen to a diversity of humans, but we also need to listen to what the Earth is telling us, to what our non-human relations are telling us because they are telling us, maybe not in words. But I think we need to actively listen with all of our beings because this is truly an existential challenge.

Tim Doak:

It is.

Gabriela Alcalde:

We can meet it if we meet it together and with great empathy and a sense of deep solidarity for each other.

Tim Doak:

So, so very important. Gabriela, thank you so much for sharing with our audience the connection between health equity and our changing climate. Thank you to our podcast listeners as well for tuning in. Until next time, I'm Tim Doak and I'm asking you to think sustainably.

Announcer:

Thank you for listening to this episode of Sustainable Healthcare. Please join us next time for a new episode. There are several ways you can tune in, on our website at northernlighthealth.org/healthyhappywise. We are also on Apple, YouTube, and Spotify, which makes it easy for you to listen on the go on your favorite app.