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School of Public Health

Title: An investigation of the knowledge, attitudes, and practices of Public Health Medicine specialists on climate-related health risks.

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ABSTRACT

Background: Climate change poses a major threat to the health of the public. Training for health professionals, including Public Health Medicine (PHM) specialists, on this topic has been limited. While PHM specialists are optimally placed to influence population level decisions related to the impact of climate change on health, their current knowledge, attitudes, and practices in this area remain unknown.

Methods: A mixed-methods cross-sectional study was conducted between July and October 2024 using a self-administered questionnaire assessing PHM specialists' knowledge, attitudes, and practices regarding climate-related health risks.

Results: The final sample for this study consisted of 23 PHM specialists. The majority of participants (n=13; 56.5%) were female. The median age of all participants was 45 years old (IQR 37-60 years). A scoring system was developed to ascertain knowledge levels, built on questions around the definition of climate change and the links between climate change and health. All participants scored “Good” or “Excellent” levels of knowledge however only nine participants (39.1%) recognised that climate change is due to human activity. Regarding attitudes around climate change, 96% (n=22) believed that climate change is happening and 83% (n=19) are worried about it. For practices, there was limited involvement of participants in climate and health-related activities, with only 30.4% (n=7) reporting involvement in climate change and health-related interventions. Most participants (n=22; 95.7%) believe that PHM specialists have a role in addressing climate change in South Africa and 87% (n=20) believe that the PHM training curriculum should include more aspects of climate-related health risks.

Conclusions: Despite the low response rate in this study, the findings provide valuable initial insights into the experiences and perspectives of PHM specialists. PHM specialists in South Africa generally possess high levels of theoretical knowledge regarding climate-related health risks however, there is a disconnect between this theoretical understanding and practical actions regarding climate change and health. Integrating climate change and health into the PHM curriculum will be valuable as it will better equip future PHM specialists with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively address this major public health threat.