

Wendy Ring speaks at UNL on climate change's effects on public health

Andrew Barry | The Daily Nebraskan
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Dr. Wendy Ring speaks on the effects of climate change and the harm our choices make to the environment and ourselves at Hardin Hall on Wednesday. She is touring the nation as part of a national engagement effort on climate change and health organized by Physicians for Social Responsibility and Climate 911.
(Craig Zimmerman, DN)

Dr. Wendy Ring may be in the health profession, but she has made promoting awareness about climate change her passion.

Ring spoke about the effects of climate change on public health to a nearly full auditorium Wednesday at Hardin Hall on the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's East Campus. She and her husband are traveling across the continental United States to spread awareness and are reaching different destinations via tandem

bicycle, camping along the way.

Ring represents Physicians for Social Responsibility and Climate 911, an organization of health professionals dedicated to voicing concerns about climate change and public health, as well as promoting revisions in how these issues are handled.

Ring is part of a growing number of health professionals concerned about how climate change is affecting human health. Health organizations such as the American Medical Association and World Health Association are cautioning people about the dangers excess carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can cause for people's well-being.

"There is no controversy among health professionals about this issue," Ring said before the event.

Four main points – air quality, water quality, food quantity and safety, and infectious disease – are linked to climate change, according to Ring. She said her concerns stemmed from environmental issues, and she translated these worries into understandable context for the general masses.

"I think my goal is to help bridge the gap between what the scientists are telling us and what the general public and policy makers know about climate change," Ring said. "It's just a communication problem. (Scientists are) speaking different languages."

Victoria Nelson, a sophomore environmental studies major, said she had not thought about climate change in the context of public health before Ring's presentation and reacted to the speech with a sense of inspiration.

“(Ring's presentation) makes me even more passionate about why I chose this career,” Nelson said.

On her journey across the U.S., Ring has participated in presentations for the public and encouraged other health professionals to join the movement. Her last destination is Washington, D.C. She said she hopes to use signatures collected from health care providers across the country to convince the federal government to make informed changes about public health issues with origins in climate change.

Ring believes asthma is one of the notable signs that carbon dioxide emissions are causing problems. An article by Scientific American said asthma rates have seen dramatic increases in the last three decades. Ring supported this research and vocalized similar information.

Ring also talked about the 2008 Beijing Olympics. A different Scientific American article said Beijing's industrial cutbacks substantially affected the air quality. At the time of the Olympics, Beijing's carbon monoxide pollution was down 47 percent, and particulate matter elevations decreased by 20 percent.

Ring doesn't know if it's too late to nurture the earth back to health, but she is not going to stop her mission.

“We really have no time to lose in lowering our emissions,” Ring said.

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