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Editorial

Climate disasters and their Impacts on public health and the Brazilian Unified Health System (SUS)*

Catástrofes climáticas e os impactos para a saúde pública e o SUS

Catástrofes climáticas y sus impactos en la salud pública y el Sistema Único de Salud (SUS)

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***** Text extracted from the speech at the Brazilian Congress on Climate Disasters (ConBrasCC) – Impacts, perspectives and challenges for the management of health services, 2025.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recognizes the climate crisis as a global health emergency, with consequences for human health and health service infrastructure.[1,2] It is estimated that between 2030 and 2050, this crisis could be responsible for approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year.[1]

We live in challenging times, marked by the intensification of extreme weather events. Among their most devastating manifestations are floods, inundations, and landslides. In 2024, Brazil witnessed, with sadness and concern, one of the most serious climate catastrophes in its recent history: the floods in the state of Rio Grande do Sul,[3] which occurred between April and May. These floods highlighted not only the effects of the climate emergency but also social vulnerability and the challenges of overburdening public services, especially the Unified Health System (SUS).

The damage to people's health—both physical and mental—and to healthcare services,[3-5] from primary care to hospital care, was immense. This damage is not limited to the moment of the event, but produces successive waves of suffering, illness, and social exclusion.[4,5] The most visible aspect is the overcrowded shelters, damaged basic units and hospitals, and improvised care.[4] But there is also a silent, less perceived layer,

which concerns psychological suffering, the rupture of bonds, collective anxiety, and the feeling of loss of dignity.

Mental health care needs to be expanded and institutionalized in response protocols.[5] Urgent training for healthcare professionals in psychosocial care must become routine in disaster contexts. Therefore, it is essential to discuss the management strategies and public policies needed to mitigate health risks in the face of these catastrophes.

The SUS responded quickly and effectively, mobilizing the National SUS Force, sending vaccines and medicines, among other actions.[5] Various public safety, civil protection, and defense agencies worked tirelessly to resolve the problems, ensuring health care for the general public and affected professionals. Also noteworthy are the solidarity networks, which mobilized rapid and decentralized responses, emotional and psychological support, community engagement, coordination, and resource mobilization.[5]

However, it is necessary to develop management strategies and public health policies with an effectively preventive, integrated, and systemic approach, which consider climate risk as a structuring component of the SUS's planning and organization. They also ensure that health services are prepared to resist and respond effectively to these events.

In this context, the role of public health surveillance services and health system managers becomes strategic.[3,5] It is imperative to prepare health facilities to respond to extreme weather events, guarantee their operational continuity, ensure access to supplies, medicines, and adequate infrastructure, and establish robust contingency plans. This requires adequate funding, resilience and equity criteria, and strong, continuous, and coordinated intersectoral governance

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