

Bill McKibben

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Female: Welcome to Conversations on Health Care with Mark Maselli and Margaret Flinter, a show where we speak to the top thought leaders in health innovation, health policy, care, delivery and the great minds who are shaping the healthcare of the future.

This week, Mark and Margaret speak with Writer, Environmentalist and Climate Change Activist Bill McKibben, who has been warning of the impending climate crisis for decades in his seminal book, *The End of Nature* published in 1989. He talks about the increasing incidents of devastating hurricanes, tornadoes, drought, wildfires sweeping the country, and how the President's Build Back Better Bill has some of the most promising climate change initiatives ever put forward.

Lori Robertson also checks in, the Managing Editor of FactCheck.org looks at misstatements spoken about health policy in the public domain separating the fake from the facts. And we end with a bright idea that's improving health and well-being and everyday lives.

If you have comments, please email us at CHCRadio@chc1.com or find us on Facebook, Twitter, or wherever you listen to podcast. Now stay tuned for our interview with Bill McKibben here on Conversations on Health Care.

Mark Masselli: We're speaking today with Bill McKibben, environmentalist, author and renowned climate change activist. He's the author of a dozen books on climate crisis from his seminal work in 1989, *'The End of Nature'* to his most recent *'Falter'*, both of which explore the deadly link between climate change and health.

Margaret Flinter: Bill is the Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College. He's the founder of 350.org and ThirdAct.org, dedicated to confronting the causes of Global Warming. Bill, we welcome you to Conversations on Health Care today.

Bill McKibben: Well, Margaret, Mark, what a pleasure to get to join you both in this community that you've created.

Mark Masselli: Well thanks so much, Bill, as you say, "We're between a rock and a hard place." And we're witnessing the climate crisis play out in real-time back to back hurricanes devastating entire regions. We have mega droughts, massive wildfires all happening simultaneously in this country.

And against that backdrop, Congress is back in Washington, taking up President Biden's \$3.5 trillion Reconciliation Bill, which includes the most significant climate change legislation ever considered. What's so groundbreaking about this legislation that President Biden just called today "Code Red for Humanity" that could have meaningful impact on

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climate change in a way that's never been done before in the United States?

Bill McKibben: Well, the first thing that's so novel about it, Mark, is simply that it exists. The U.S. Congress has known about climate change for 30 years, and they've done zero, zilch. We never passed real climate legislation. The closest we came was in 2009, when there was something called cap-and-trade, and it never even reached a vote in the US Senate. So this would be novel simply by its existence. But beyond that, it's really the first piece of legislation that even begins to address, climate change at something like the scale of the promo.

We've delayed so long now. And things have gotten so far out of control that it's going to take a real effort. And this is a down payment on that effort anyway and hopefully enough to really start jumpstarting the transition to renewable energy that we desperately need.

Margaret Flinter: But Bill, you noticed in a recent article, that it's not the heat, it's the humanity, which I really appreciated. And say that climate change and pollution caused an estimated 5 million global deaths per year. But the scientists say global warming poses a far greater risk to human health than the pandemics. I keep having in my mind an image of the Doomsday Clock that we used to look at around the potential for nuclear war. But climate change now being right up there, on the Doomsday Clock? What's the true cost of human health that we're seeing, even today?

Bill McKibben: This is such an interesting question, Margaret, because you can answer it in two ways. One, there is a big cost to human health, when you have an endless series of fires, floods, storms, and an endless increase in the number of people, on the move around the world because the place where they lived for generations no longer sustains life. I mean, we're seeing even in the most rich parts of the entire world, I mean, in Manhattan, people were drowning in basement apartments when the remnants of Hurricane Ida swept through.

So you can imagine what the toll is like in the poorest parts of the world. Is that the thing that causes climate change, and fossil fuels, burning coal, oil and gas, also kills people quite directly. The pollution that's produced when it's combusted, not the carbon dioxide, it doesn't really do much to us directly, but the carbon monoxide and the particulates and the other forms of pollution that come when you burn fossil fuel.

There was a study this year indicating that it's killing about 8.7 million people a year, more than HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria combined. It's about one death in five on this planet. So getting rid of fossil fuel not only helps us ward off the very worst of climate change

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and the death toll that comes with it. It also has immediate payoffs in terms of human health, just from what we're breathing every day. There is no reason, not to do it now, the scientists and engineers have worked there miracles and wind power and solar power are now the cheapest forms of power on planet Earth. In a rational world, we would be devoting all our energy to spreading that miracle just as fast as we could.

Mark Masselli: Bill, I want to pick up on the thread that you have identified that really the vulnerable population all across the globe is being impacted, and we see it play out here, right in our own organization at Community Health Center. How do we leverage our healthcare delivery and our public health systems to mitigate, I would say, even prevent the worst harm of climate change? Is there a greater role for the healthcare industry to play?

Bill McKibben: Yes, of course, one of the things that the pandemic should have taught us, I think, I mean, there are a bunch of things like physical reality is real so take it seriously. But clearly, one of the most important is that solidarity really matters, that we need to be taking care of each other in serious ways.

The three of us have kind of grown up under the political shadow of Ronald Reagan, who convinced a generation of Americans that government was the problem, not the solution. The last line in his speeches was always, the nine scariest words in the English language are, "I'm from the government, and I'm here to help." But it turns out, the scariest words are things like "We've ran out of ventilators" or "The hillside behind your house just caught on fire." And you don't solve those things with market solutions, you solve them with people working together and to solve problems.

And so we're at one of those moments. And this is really reflected in this \$3.5 trillion bill that the Biden Administration is putting forward. Because part of it is devoted to infrastructure, infrastructure of the kind that this solar panels, the electric car chargers, that we need to deal with the climate crisis. But another large part of it is directed at what's called human infrastructure, at the education and healthcare policies that allow us to build a society that's stable, equitable, resilient enough to begin to handle what's coming at it. And one without the other does not make sense.

I was off with my friend Bernie Sanders a week ago, giving some speeches across our home state of Vermont. And he said, at one point, something that struck in my mind, he said, "We're not just going to build bridges, so that people can sleep under them, we have to take care of all parts of our infrastructure needs."

Margaret Flinter: Well, that's a powerful image. You know I want to congratulate you

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for spearheading one of the largest divestiture campaigns in modern history with a recent win, Harvard being the latest institution to divest fossil fuels from its portfolio. I'm thinking of all the work that's been done over the last 30 years, you head the (00:08:27) Coalition and the Global Reporting Initiative, and lots of folks that focused on reporting to change corporate behavior, but this really may actually change the way the fossil fuel industry works. And what do you think this kind of economic strategy is going to do in terms of exerting pressure on the fossil fuel industry? Will things be different?

Bill McKibben

Well, the reason we undertook this divestment campaign, which has become the largest anti-corporate campaign, perhaps in history, were about \$15 trillion now in portfolios and endowments that have divested. The reason we undertook it is because the fossil fuel industry has been a malign force on this planet. They have orchestrated a 30 year scheme of denial and disinformation that kept us locked in a completely sterile debate about whether or not global warming was real. A debate we now know from great investigative reporting, that both sides, the fossil fuel industry and scientists knew the answer to back when it began. It's just one of those sides was willing to lie. And that lie has cost us 30 years that we are never getting back.

The thing to realize about climate change is, unlike other public policy issues, it's a timed test. If we don't get it right, right now then there is no chance anyone in the future will. In our society we've been debating National Health Care say, as long as I've been alive, and I think it's a tragedy we've never done it, and lots of people have gone bankrupt and lots of people have died. But when we finally get around to doing it, it won't be harder to do because we delayed. Climate change isn't like that, once you melt the Arctic, no one's got a plan to refreeze it. And it's the fossil fuel industry that has cost us that time. And it continues to try and delay.

So any strategy that weakens their financial and political standing is helpful in advancing the rational work that scientists, engineers are doing to point us in a new direction. Their willingness to hold on to their business model, even at the cost of breaking the planet probably puts even the tobacco industry in the shade as the single worst example of corporate malfeasance of all time.

So that's why that divestment movement has now gotten, not just Harvard and Oxford and Cambridge and the University of California are behind it, but also, even the Pope and the Queen of England have come out for divestment, you know, short of getting Beyonce on board. I don't know what else we're supposed to do at this point.

Mark Masselli:

We're speaking today with Bill McKibben, writer, environmentalist and renowned climate activist. He's the author of a dozen books on

climate change, including “The End of Nature” and more recently “Falter”. You know, Bill, the Trump Administration, during that we slid backwards, we withdrew from the Paris Climate Accord, we left the WHO, drilling and pipeline production increased, glacier melt and deforestation, as you were mentioning, progressed at such a dramatic pace.

The UN recently released a report stating “Without a doubt, climate change is indeed manmade. And immediate action is required.” Even you say that action is going to require organizing. So how do we organize in a collective way to meet these persistent challenges of climate change? You've talked about one initiative, which is investing in alternatives to fossil fuel, but what other ways can you lay out that we might organize?

Bill McKibben:

Superb question, Mark. The two good things that have happened in the last decade are one that scientists and engineers have dropped the cost of renewable energy 90%. And the other is that these big global movements have arisen to demand change.

I got to work on sort of the first iteration of that, when we formed 350.org, about a decade ago. And it's gone on to organize in every country on earth except North Korea. Now there are people flooding into this area. So we have in Europe, Extinction Rebellion. We have the wonderful post-college students from the Sunrise Movement, who have brought us the Green New Deal. And we have most beautifully and movingly I think, the high school and junior high school students who probably have the most active role. Everybody knows about Greta Thunberg, and they should, she's wonderful. But she would be the first to say that the best news is, there are 10,000 Greta Thunbergs, and they have 10 million followers, demanding that we pay attention to their future. So those kinds of movements are crucial.

Individual action, you can't make the climate math work now, one Tesla at a time, one vegan dinner at a time. The most important thing an individual can do is be less of an individual. To join together with others in movements large enough to change the political and economic ground rules.

And so that's why for those of us who aren't so young, and for those of us who are over 60, we've just launched this new effort called ThirdAct.org that will allow experienced Americans to play their part, supporting young people in this fight. These generations, many of us had a pretty good first act, we were witness to our participant in some profound cultural and political transformations, the Women's Movement, the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Movement. Perhaps our second act, taken as a whole was more devoted to being consumers than citizens. But we've now emerged in our third acts

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with lots of skills, more than our share of resources, and some grandkids. And hence, real reason not to want to leave the world a worse place than we found it, which is going to be our legacy. We're going to be the first generation that can carry that curse unless we get our act together very quickly.

Margaret Flinter:

I think you're absolutely right. And one of those many lessons we've learned along the way was "Don't Whine, Organize!" But we come from many different spheres of influence and I think we want to press the levers on all those spheres. And I've been so cheered by seeing what a trend there is among in healthcare, and we're very engaged in training the next generation of healthcare providers. But a real trend among the teaching institutions to include climate change in their curriculum. You know, thinking back to the I will add Physicians for social responsibility to the list of groups that you name there, you know, was tremendously effective, raising awareness about the threat of extinction by their work. Nurses are still the number one, most trusted profession in the United States where nurses are speaking to the issue of climate change.

What are your thoughts about the healthcare sector, the healthcare workforce as another lever in this act of influencing, both policy and politics, but also individual and community and state-level behaviors? Is there anybody doing that well, that you would give a shout out to?

Bill McKibben:

There are people doing it very well from the National Nurses Union on down, people who are working hard, Health Care without Harm. There are a lot of organizations that have taken this seriously. You know, medicine is one of the few professions left in our world that has no choice but just to deal with brute reality. It's in a better place than almost anyone else to understand what's going on.

In literal terms, the planet is running a fever now, and that requires all of the rest of us become the antibodies that find the cause of that infection and fight it. That's what organizing is. And doctors, nurses, other health professionals are exquisitely well positioned to do that, though you wouldn't always know it from watching the craziness around COVID and vaccinations and things. People still, by and large do trust doctors and nurses, because they take good care of us by and large.

Mark Masselli:

Bill, you describe the manmade ecological disaster of climate change as a moral catastrophe. But you say there is a cause for optimism. Firstly, there is a dramatic reduction in the cost of renewables. And second, a growing movement of climate activism, by young people like as you've mentioned, Greta Thunberg.

I'm just wondering, in terms of your pitch, if you will, or the message that you're sending, there is this place between motivation and

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despair, when we think about climate change. And I'm wondering what that right message is, because so often we hear people come away from these and just say, there is nothing I can do. And then there is that point, where you can motivate them to move forward. What have you found in your own experiences, you are out on the stump talking to people, trying to motivate them, but also recognizing that there is a real disaster, currently taking place in our globe, how do you find that, right problem is?

Bill McKibben:

I think the problem is less finding the balance between optimism and despair. I think the real problem is that climate change seems so large, and we seem so small in comparison, that it becomes hard for us to imagine that we can make a real difference. And that's why I think the key word that some people use is agency, the sense that we have the power to make a difference. We only have it when we come together. But when we come together, when we work in these movements, people find it not just powerful, they find it an extraordinary relief, including psychologically, to be engaged in this fight.

Now, we do not know how this fight is going to come out. And that's different from other causes that we've been engaged in. Dr. King used to say at the end of speeches, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice." that was a comforting words for the brave people in the Civil Rights Movement. What it meant was, this may take a while but we're going to win.

Well, "The arc of the physical universe is short, and it bends toward heat." If we don't win soon, then we never win. And that's why, you know, that's why some of us end up going to jail, which seems crazy, but it's what it's taken often to get these things done. Not everybody has to go to jail, but everybody has to be outside their comfort zone, because the planet is a mile outside of its comfort zone. What we're doing so far is not enough and so we need to step up our game.

Margaret Flinter:

You know, we've had a frontline seat, all of us and Mark and I, true as well, on the COVID pandemic, as we saw it descend in our communities and really mobilize the troops to mount a statewide effort around vaccines, and testing. And engaged in many conversations with our staff, but with people in general in the communities and I realized probably should have seen (inaudible 00:19:34) there were quite a few deniers out there, about the reality of COVID, the impact of COVID, the whole vaccine controversy. And when we think about climate, there is the climate deniers too. And they're not all in the fossil fuel industry. They are pretty widespread, I think throughout the country. But it would be hard to have watched the news over the last four to six weeks and not at least allowed for the possibility that something really bad was going on here in terms of

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climate change.

I'm wondering what you're seeing and what are polls telling us, when you look across the country, is there a shift beginning, to this being more commonly accepted that this is real, and we need to do something about it?

Bill McKibben: Yes. So over the last three or four years, there has been a decisive shift, Margaret. And the polling now shows that 70% of Americans understand that we face a real dilemma with climate change.

Margaret Flinter: 70% --

Bill McKibben: 70%, the country as polarized as ours. 70% is good, you know.

Margaret Flinter: Yes, yeah.

Bill McKibben: Yes, the deniers remain, but they are not going to change because their beliefs aren't rooted in science. They are just rooted in ideology. And if you've spent the last 30 years marinating yourself in Rush Limbaugh, you wouldn't be able to think clearly about this kind of stuff either. I mean, ideology is a dangerous drug, sometimes. It gets in the way of reality.

But the problem is not deniers. The problem is that of that 70%, not enough people are active in this fight. We've got to take some percentage of those people and turn them into real battlers. And COVID is instructive here. I think we're doing better as time goes on, on that fight.

One difference is, happily, there is no trillion dollar industry that wants us all to die from COVID, you know. Sadly, there is a trillion dollar industry that wants us to keep our current energy business model intact. And that's why it's been taken us 30 years to overcome the disinformation schemes of the fossil fuel industry. But we're getting there.

The only thing that worries me is time. The scientists have told us, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in their last report said that we had until 2030, to have emissions cut emissions in half around the globe or we would not be able to reach the targets we set in Paris just five or six years ago.

2030 is now eight years and change away, we're all experienced enough to know that our systems are not geared for rapid change. So we're going to have to gear them for a rapid change. That's our job to force the spring here.

Mark Masselli: You know, let me pull a question on the Paris Climate Accord. Candidate Joe Biden said that the first act that he would do, one of the first acts was to rejoin the Paris Climate Accord, which he saw as a

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paramount step, really to address global climate change. But activists like yourself, say more must be done. Tell us what the strengths and weaknesses of the Paris Accord are so people can have a broader view.

Bill McKibben: Even when we signed the Paris Climate Accords, we knew and President Obama said at the time, that it wasn't strong enough. Even if we met all the promises, in the Paris Climate Accords that countries made, the temperature would still rise about three-degrees Celsius, so five, six-degrees Fahrenheit, which is too much, we can't deal with that. And that's why everybody is aimed at strengthening the ambition of countries. And the crucial meeting is in November in Glasgow. The most important climate meeting, at least since Paris.

John Kerry, the Former Secretary of State is now our Climate Envoy, demonstrating I think how seriously the Biden Administration has taken this. And he needs to be able to go to Glasgow, to negotiate with something in his pocket. That something is that \$3.5 trillion bill before the U.S. Senate. If it passes, then he'll be able to say with a straight face, the U.S. has begun to commit serious resources to this fight. We're moving up our timetable. China, India, we need you to move up yours. If he goes there with nothing in his pocket, then that's not going to be a productive meeting. And that eight years is suddenly going to seem even shorter than it seems now.

Margaret Flinter: We've been speaking today with Bill McKibben, environmentalist, author, and renowned climate change activist. You can learn more about his groundbreaking work by going to www.billmckibben.com, and I'm going to spell it M-C-K-I-B-B-E-N, or follow him on Twitter @billmckibben.

Bill. We want to thank you for shouting truth to power during decades of climate activism, for informing our world about the complex nature of climate crisis, and for inspiring generations of new activists. And thank you so much for joining us today on Conversations on Health Care.

Bill McKibben: Well, I've enjoyed it enormously. And thanks to both of you for your leadership, especially your leadership in building this informed community, that's what it takes.

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Mark Masselli: At Conversations on Health Care we want our audience to be truly in the know when it comes to the facts about healthcare reform and policy. Lori Robertson is an award winning journalist and Managing Editor of FactCheck.org a nonpartisan, nonprofit consumer advocate for voters that aim to reduce the level of deception in U.S. politics. Lori, what have you got for us this week?

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Lori Robertson: The majority of United States residents who have not been vaccinated against COVID-19 are White, according to available State Data and Survey Research. That contradicts Texas Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick's claim that in most states Black residents are "The Biggest Group" of unvaccinated people.

The Kaiser Family Foundation, a nonpartisan health issues organization reported on comparable data from 40 states. As of August 16th, the percentage of people who had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine was 50% for Whites, 45% for Hispanics and 40% for Blacks. Because Blacks and Hispanics make up a much smaller portion of the overall U.S. population than Whites, those percentages indicate that in raw numbers, far more White people remain unvaccinated against the disease.

But Patrick in an August 19th appearance on Fox News falsely implied that it was unvaccinated Black people who are responsible for the resurgence of the Coronavirus in his State, and around the rest of the country. In responding to critics who fault the policies of Republican Governor Greg Abbott's Administration for the recent increase in COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths in Texas, Patrick said, "Well, the biggest group in most states are African Americans who have not been vaccinated."

A Kaiser Family Foundation poll conducted in July found that among unvaccinated adults, 57% were White, 20% were Hispanic and 13% were Black. As for Patrick's suggestion that Black people are driving cases up in Texas, it was Hispanic and White residents who accounted for 37% and 32% of the State's nearly 100,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 during the week of August 20th. Black residents made up nearly 15% of the cases. And that's my factcheck for this week. I'm Lori Robertson, Managing Editor of FactCheck.org.

Margaret Flinter: FactCheck.org is committed to factual accuracy from the country's major political players and is a project of the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. If you have a fact that you'd like checked, email us at www.chcradio.com, we'll have FactCheck.org's, Lori Robertson check it out for you here on Conversations on Health Care.

Each week Conversations highlights a bright idea about how to make wellness a part of our communities and everyday lives. It's a known fact that the current generation of American children is more obese than any previous generation. And at a Washington DC Community Health Center, Unity Health Care a pediatrician was in a quandary over how to tackle this growing health scourge. He began with a unique solution targeted to a teen patient whose Body Mass Index or BMI had already landed her in the obese category. What he did was write a prescription for getting off the bus, one stop earlier on her

way to school, which made her walk the equivalent of one mile a day.

Dr. Robert Zarr of Unity Community Health Center understood that without motivation to move more kids just might not do it. The patient has moved from the obese down to the overweight category, certainly an improvement. He then decided to expand this program by working with the DC Parks Department, mapping out all the potential walks and play area kids have within the city's parks.

Dr. Robert Zarr: How to get their parking, is parking available if someone is going to drive, bike racks, there is a section on pets Park safety.

Margaret Flinter: Dr. Zarr writes park prescriptions on a special prescription pad, in English and Spanish, with the words "Rx for outdoor activity" and a schedule slot that asks, "When and where will you play outside this week?"

Dr. Robert Zarr: I like to listen and find out what it is my patients like to do, and then gauge the parks, I prescribe based on their interests, based on the things they're willing to do.

Margaret Flinter: Ultimately, Dr. Zarr says, he wants to make the prescription for outdoor activity adaptable for all of his patients, and adaptable for pediatricians around the country. Rx for outdoor activity, partnering clinicians, Park administrators, patients and families to move more, yielding fitter, healthier young people, now that's a bright idea.

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Mark Masselli: You've been listening to Conversations on Health Care. I'm Mark Masselli.

Margaret Flinter: And I'm Margaret Flinter.

Mark Masselli: Peace and Health.

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