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Lancet Editor Makes Case for Planetary Health in CUGH Keynote Speech

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By Jessica Scully

Human health cannot be divorced from broader societal issues, and the future of human civilization depends on taking a new approach to our planet and its resources, argued Richard Horton, editor of the British medical journal *The Lancet*.

Horton gave the keynote speech, "Making the Case for Planetary Health: Why and How" at the 2016 Consortium of Universities for Global Health ([CUGH](#))

conference, held April 9 to 11 in downtown San Francisco.

Horton began by noting he had recently learned a new Chinese word: *yuanfen*, which means fate without destiny. As humans, we know our "disturbing" and "perplexing" fate, "the predicament of our own existence."

"But we don't yet know our destiny, we don't yet know the place where we're going to end up, where were going to come to rest."

Throughout his speech, Horton argued that human destiny depends on the choices we make now.

Like Michihiko Hachiya, the Japanese physician who documented the lives of Hiroshima's citizens after the first atomic bomb was dropped in World War II, we must recognize that documentation is powerful, and must bear witness, he said.

"Writing, reporting, and describing what we see in an effort to remove any misunderstanding between us is about protecting us from further acts of violence that we do to one another," Horton said.

Our destiny also depends on achieving "a realistic utopia" of sustainable development, Horton said. While some have scoffed at the idea of utopia, humans' deliberative capacity and that we have in our history been able to live together in diversity in an "environment of democratic peace" shows this is possible, he said.

Noting that everyone in the audience was familiar with the United Nations' [Sustainable Development Goals](#), he said interpreting the global health goals as being only about global health would be "a severe mistake."

"We have to cross outside health and think about the relation between health and other dimensions of what is being defined as sustainability," including education, gender equity, economic growth, and the rule of law, he noted.

Furthering human civilization by achieving these goals will require a new approach to health of our planet, he said. In the past 250 years, billions of people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, and life expectancy has increased. But in the process, human civilization has put extreme demands on earth's energy, water, and land, and resulted in a "cataclysmic loss of biodiversity," he said.

Planetary health, "the health of human civilization and the state of the natural systems on which it depends," is a unifying concept to help solve this problem, he said.

Humankind must move from a linear economy of creating, owning, and discarding, to a "performance economy that will be about stewardship, responsibility, and shared ownership," of our planet and resources, he said.

Global systems aren't working well, which has led to a retreat into nationalism, he said. But just as human health and civilization are linked with the health of our planet, as humans our futures are linked, no matter our nationality.

"We need to forge a new global identity, because it's civilization that is at stake," he said.

Read more about the [CUGH conference here](#).