



# Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR): Addressing Public Health Issues Medicine Alone Cannot Cure

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**N**uclear Weapons and Disarmament. Fracking. Violence and Guns. Climate Change and Health. Air Pollution. Water Pollution. Restorative Justice. These are issues that normally are not addressed in medical and other health profession schools, but very clearly can have a significant impact on the health and well-being of individuals and populations. These are the topics that form the major efforts of Physicians for Social Responsibility Philadelphia/PA and Physicians for Social Responsibility National; they address these issues that medicine alone cannot cure.

As for the history of the organization, Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR) National was founded in 1961 and soon gained recognition by documenting the presence of Strontium-90, a highly radioactive waste product of atmospheric nuclear testing, in children's teeth. It was partially because of this very significant finding that the Limited Nuclear Test Ban Treaty came about, leading to the end of atmospheric nuclear testing. In 1985, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to IPPNW (International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War), of which PSR is the United States' affiliate, for its significant role in helping to reverse the nuclear arms race. Starting in 1992, PSR National expanded its focus to include environmental health issues such as climate change and pollution. Along these lines, as a chapter of PSR National, PSR Philadelphia/PA addresses local concerns while ensuring that its mission is in sync with that of the national organization.

What are some of the environmental health activities conducted by PSR Philadelphia/PA? In order to address environmental issues, PSR Philadelphia/PA has been amongst those organizations on the forefront of efforts to reduce climate change and to place a halt to fracking in the state. It is widely acknowledged by the scientific

community and many others that climate change is the greatest public health challenge facing the planet today. Extreme weather and more vector-borne illnesses are occurring more frequently and leading to increases in morbidity and mortality. As for energy sources, according to Pouna Saberi, M.D., M.P.H., Board President of PSR Philadelphia/PA, “what we are aiming for are energy efficiency and clean renewable sources, looking at research models and real life examples as well.”

PSR crafts its public health message so that decision makers are hearing from professionals on this topic along with many other environmental health concerns, including air pollution and water pollution. PSR Philadelphia/PA members have met with legislators, provided scientific research and recommendations, created fact sheets, given on-site presentations to communities particularly in Philadelphia, Pittsburgh and Erie, appeared on radio broadcasts, written letters to the editor of many newspapers, participated in marches, and continued to write blogs and send out important twitter messages to followers. With the increasing deregulation of many environmental safeguards that have been in place in the past, the need for such efforts is only becoming greater.

PSR Philadelphia/PA has not only been concerned with assaults from the environment and nuclear testing, but with interpersonal violence as well. To that end, they have been involved with two major programs. Since 1995, PSR has led Peaceful Posse groups where youths, all male or all female groups, have met weekly with a group leader to talk about their feelings, what is occurring at home and at school, and their stressors. Within a safe space, the participants learn coping and problem-solving techniques about how to meet daily challenges and how to communicate their feelings in a healthy manner, in order to foster individual well-being and decrease the chances of interpersonal violence.

Close-knit peer support by the participants aids in relationship building. The other program that has been in effect since the mid-90s is Youth Court, which PSR has hosted in more than a dozen middle schools and high schools in the City. Through the youth courts, students who receive disciplinary actions at their schools are able to have their actions discussed in mock court rooms instead of going to the principals' offices. Students play judge, jury and legal teams. To be part of youth court, youths who committed infractions must admit to their wrongdoing and allow their fellow youths in their judge and jury roles to decide how to best handle the misbehaviors.

A restorative justice model rather than punishment is used. Additionally, they all learn about the legal system. The goal of this program is to decrease school expulsions and drop-out rates while improving

behaviors, and it has been in operation in many states across the country. In addition to these two programs, PSR Philadelphia/PA has fairly recently become one of the organizing leaders of CODE RED PA, a collaborative group of a number of organizations, meeting for the past two years to address issues of gun violence prevention in Philadelphia and in the state. Gun violence prevention policies and potential actions are being discussed and developed.

The Soul of Medicine event is a very special gathering put together by PSR Philadelphia/PA generally annually in order to have health-care students and healthcare professionals come together. They are asked to discuss topics such as what has motivated them to become healthcare providers, the satisfaction as well as the stresses and strains that have occurred as a consequence of being in those roles, and how best to nurture the nurturers/clinicians to help prevent burnout. During the event, medical students who have been nominated by their medical schools for being outstanding in their delivery of care to patients receive awards.

PSR Philadelphia/PA has also been instrumental in developing an advocacy training program that has now been delivered to a number of medical schools as well as hospitals and other healthcare institutions. Through the program, students, residents, practitioners and others learn how best to advocate for their issues of concern, whether through visits to legislators or through writing letters to editors and more. They learn how to think about and narrow their issues in order to make their perspectives most effective. The program has been very well received.

If anyone would like to become involved with PSR Philadelphia/PA, there are many ways to do so. Volunteers are sought for public speaking, providing testimony and writing blogs in addition to aiding with basic clerical tasks and event tabling. Students have been accepted for student membership on their board, aided communication and research projects, and helped to lead advocacy trainings. One can also join a PSR Committee, such as the Speakers' Bureau or Advisory Council, particularly if one has expertise in relevant fields. More information may be obtained by visiting the website at [www.psrphila.org](http://www.psrphila.org).

PSR Philadelphia/PA just recently celebrated its 40th anniversary and looks forward to continuing to expand and provide healthcare and public health expertise and leadership in critical areas needed today even more than ever. •