Can doctors teach the rest of us to follow a piece of advice from Hippocrates—“Help, or at least, do no harm”—when dealing with the environment? Eric Chivian ’64, M.D. ’68, hopes so.

A lean, elegant man of 60, Chivian is a physician by training, but his chief mission in life is to convince people that we are dependent on natural ecosystems—which we are altering in ways we do not fully understand. Our disregard of the consequences, he fears, will cause irreparable harm and already poses a serious threat to human health. Future generations, he is convinced, will view our behavior with disbelief, wondering how we could have been so shortsighted.

In 1996, with private foundation grants, Chivian established the Center for Health and the Global Environment (CHGE) at Harvard Medical School (HMS), the first of its kind at a medical school and an official “collaborating center” of the United Nations Environment Program. The School of Public Health (HSPH) had expressed early interest in the center, but Chivian held out for the medical school: “We didn’t want this effort to be seen only as an area of scholarly inquiry or academic and theoretical interest. We wanted it to be seen as information that practicing doctors needed to know.” Policymakers and the public, he believes, will turn increasingly to the medical community for information and understanding about the way environmental change affects health, “and they’re going to be asking physicians for assistance in the formulation of policy.”

In 1997 he launched the first course ever given at HMS on health and the global environment. “Human Health and Global Environmental Change” is now one of the most popular environmental courses at Harvard, attracting students throughout the University. Last fall 70 students enrolled directly and another 170 participated on-line. (The course has also become a model for similar classes at 43 other medical schools, including seven abroad.) Chivian delivers the introductory lecture but invites others to handle the rest—specialists like Pellegrino University Research Professor Edward O. Wilson (see page 36); geneticist David Suzuki, host of the popular Canadian TV show, The Nature of Things; designer William McDonough, called a “Hero for the Planet” by Time magazine; and Naﬁs Sadik, executive director of the United Nations Population Fund.

In his lecture, Chivian minces no words in stating the themes of the course. “We are altering the physical, chemical, and biological systems of the planet in ways that have enormous implications for all living things, including ourselves,” he tells his audience. “We have become separated from the environment in which we live and disconnected from the natural world. We see nature both as a hostile force to be conquered and exploited, and as an infinite resource that exists for our use alone.”

Chivian has taken an interest in the natural environment since he was a boy growing up in New Jersey, but the path he followed to his current activism included a few detours. At Harvard he majored in biochemistry; at the medical school, he specialized in psychiatry. He was neither politically minded nor active in social causes.

**Photograph by Stu Rosner**
But his attitude changed, he says, after he married in 1968 and his first child was born: “That made me more conscious of the legacy that my own and all the other children of the world would inherit.”

The seminal event that triggered his social activism, however, was a fellow physician’s role in bringing an end to plans for a U.S. supersonic transport. Thomas Fitzpatrick, M.D. ’45, then chief of dermatology at Massachusetts General Hospital, testified before Congress about how cases of malignant melanoma would increase as a result of the damage SSTs would do to the ozone layer. That incident made Chivian aware of the influence physicians could have on public policy. “I started thinking about the potential power of the medical community to shape policy,” he says, “and began nurturing the idea of some kind of physicians’ group that would work on environmental issues.”

In 1978 he heard pediatrician Helen Caldicott speak about nuclear power. “She was electrifying,” he recalls. “I talked to her subsequently about getting doctors involved in environmental work. She liked my idea but thought we should focus more narrowly on nuclear issues.”

Soon after, Chivian, Caldicott, and Ira Helfand ’71, M.D. (then at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge), reactivated Physicians for Social Responsibility (PSR), an antinuclear group that had formed in Boston in 1960, but subsequently became dormant. PSR announced its rebirth on March 29, 1979, with a public meeting and press conference at Faneuil Hall in Boston and a full-page ad in the New England Journal of Medicine that mentioned the medical consequences of nuclear war. The night before, the nuclear power plant at Three Mile Island in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, had a partial core meltdown.

“It was unbelievable,” Chivian recalls. “The bad news was that all the science and medical reporters from Boston were in Harrisburg. The good news was that Faneuil Hall was packed with people frightened that the radioactive cloud would drift over major population areas. The really good news was that 250,000 subscribers to the Journal got their copy that day, and in two weeks we were a national organization with enough money, thanks to so many people joining us.”

In 1980, PSR became the U.S. member of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), which Chivian and two other HMS faculty members—Herbert Abrams, then professor of radiology, and James Muller, then assistant professor of medicine—were instrumental in founding. IPPNW won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1985 for its work toward nuclear disarmament. For Chivian that meant two things: first, physicians around the world could work together in a cause that did not recognize political boundaries or ideologies; and second, it was possible to make the abstraction of nuclear war concrete. “Our biggest contribution,” he suggests, “is that we helped change public opinion about nuclear war. By organizing conferences in major cities around the world and talking about what would happen to people in New York City or London or Moscow if there were a nuclear war, we brought the subject down to a level people could understand.”

Chivian now seeks to do for the environment what he did for nuclear war. As director of CHGE, he oversees campaigns on several fronts (for details, see the center’s website, www.med.harvard.edu/chge). Most important to him is the HMS course, “because we are trying to educate and involve future physicians and public-health professionals. They are potentially the most powerful people in changing public opinion about, and becoming informed advocates for, the environment.”

The course has already inspired several students. For example, Paul Rosenau, HMS ’04, took time off to get a master’s degree in pollution prevention at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell and is a coauthor of the Harvard Planning and Real Estate Environmental Procurement Guide, published last year (see www.greencampus.harvard.edu/programs/HPRE_Sustainable_Procurement.pdf). Patricia Myung, a third-year medical student at Brown, revived a Physicians for Social Responsibility chapter there after hearing Chivian speak and introduced his course to Brown’s medical school. Chivian, she says, “is a great inspiration and made me realize that every environmental issue is a public-health issue that the medical profession cannot ignore.” She is now the occupational and environmental health coordinator for the American Medical Student Association’s Global Health Action Committee, whose mission is to raise awareness and prompt action globally on a range of environmentally related health issues.

Last fall students at HMS and HSPH formed a new group, Students for Environmental Awareness in Medicine. SEAM members want environmental issues to receive greater attention in medical school curriculums; they also plan to distribute to every medical student in the country a petition that outlines links between environmental change and adverse health effects and asks that environmental protection become a top national priority. They hope, says Frances Baxley, HMS ’05, that by November 2004 “preserving the environment in the interests of preserving health will become…part of the public debate for every governor, every senator, every representative, the president, the vice president, and all major hopefuls.”

Chivian himself thinks “the greatest danger for the environment lies in the profound lack of understanding among political leaders and policymakers, particularly in the United States, of the fact that human health ultimately depends on the health of the global environment.” Through the center, he conducts educational programs for Congress and other federal agencies, reaching out to offices and committee members from both parties with briefings and nontechnical summaries of important scientific findings about the environment. Every spring he offers an intensive two-day course for congressional staff members; topics last year included bioterrorism. At home, CHGE works with Boston mayor Thomas Menino’s office to promote energy-efficient building and transportation plans and policies. Through Menino—who chairs the U.S. Conference of Mayors—Chivian hopes that concern for environmental issues will spread to other mayors.

Last September—a decade after the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro—CHGE issued Biodiversity: Its Importance to Human Health, a 96-page report edited by Chivian. This “executive summary” presents policymakers and the general public with a foretaste of what will be the most com-
Your Vote Counts

Ballots for Overseer and for elected director of the Harvard Alumni Association will arrive in mid April and must be returned by 12 P.M. on May 30 to be counted. All Harvard degree holders are eligible to vote. The following list of nominees—all selected by the HAA’s nominating committee—was up to date as of February 1, when this issue went to press. Results of the election are announced on Commencement Day, June 5.

For Overseer (six-year term, five to be elected)*

Michael Cronin ’75, M.B.A. ’77, West- 

Roger Ferguson ’73, J.D. ’77, Ph.D. ’81, Washington, D.C. Vice chairman of the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System.

Merrick Garland ’74, J.D. ’77, Washing- 
ton, D.C. Judge, U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit.

Carl Pforzheimer ’58, M.B.A.’63, Scars- 
dale, N.Y. Investment banker, managing partner, Carl H. Pforzheimer & Co.

Earl “Rusty” Powell, Ph.D ’74, Alexan- 
dria, Va. Director, National Gallery of Art.

Joan Steitz, Ph.D ’67, Branford, Conn. Investigator, Howard Hughes Medical Institute, and Sterling professor of molecular biophysics and biochemistry, Yale.


Pauline Yu ’70, Pacific Palisades, Calif. Dean of humanities and professor of East Asian languages and cultures, UCLA.

For HAA Director (three-year term, 
six to be elected)**

Alexander Aldrich ’80, Montpelier, Vt. Executive director, Vermont Arts Council.

Changes that have enormous consequences for human health and survival. These are issues that physicians must become involved in, for we can help people understand, perhaps better than anyone else, that we human beings are an intimate part of the environment, that our lives depend on its health. We should be able to protect the global environment the way we helped prevent a nuclear war, but it will demand all of our creativity, wisdom, and hard work. I am under no illusions about how difficult this task will be, but I feel for our children’s sake that we have no choice.” ~John de Cuevas

John de Cuevas, a contributing editor of this magazine, profiled Harvard’s Hessel professor of biology, lepidopterist Naomi Pierce, in “A Life with Lycaenids,” in the July-August 2001 issue.

A SPECIAL NOTICE REGARDING COMMENCEMENT EXERCISES

THURSDAY, JUNE 5, 2003

MORNING EXERCISES

To accommodate the increasing number of those wishing to attend Harvard’s Commencement Exercises, the following guidelines are proposed to facilitate admission into Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement Morning.

• Degree candidates will receive a limited number of tickets to Commencement. Parents and guests of degree candidates must have tickets, which they will be required to show at the gates in order to enter Tercentenary Theatre. Seating capacity is limited; however, there is standing room on the Widener steps and at the rear and sides of the Theatre for viewing the exercises.

Note: A ticket allows admission into the Theatre, but does not guarantee a seat. The sale of Commencement tickets is prohibited.

• Alumni/ae attending their major reunions (25th, 35th, 50th) will receive tickets at their reunions.

• Alumni/ae in classes beyond the 50th may obtain tickets from the Classes and Reunions Office, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

A limited supply of tickets will be made available to all other alumni/ae on a first-come, first-served basis through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

Afternoon Exercises

The Harvard Alumni Association’s Annual Meeting convenes in Tercentenary Theatre on Commencement afternoon. All alumni and alumnae, faculty, students, parents, and guests are invited to attend and hear President Summers and the Commencement Speaker deliver their addresses. Tickets for the afternoon ceremony will be available through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

Joseph Azelby ’84, Cresskill, N.J. J.P. Morgan Fleming Asset Management (New York City).

Thomas Castro ’76, Houston. President, El Dorado Communications Inc.

Mark Chandler ’78, Palo Alto. Vice president of legal services and general counsel, Cisco Systems Inc.

Susan Fales-Hill ’84, New York City. Writer, television producer.

Marilyn Holifield, J.D. ’72, Miami. Attorney and partner, Holland & Knight LLP.

Alan Khazei ’83, J.D. ’87, Jamaica Plain, Mass. CEO, City Year Inc.


Visiting Campus

“Return to Harvard Day,” on April 3, offers alumni of all classes, their spouses, and high-school-age children the chance to attend and hear President Summers and the Commencement Speaker deliver their addresses. Tickets for the afternoon ceremony will be available through the Harvard Alumni Association, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138.

*Nominations of one or more Overseer candidates may be made each year by holders of Harvard degrees. Such nominations must be made on an official nomination form furnished by the Secretary of the Board upon request to qualified applicants. For 2003 the petition had to contain at least 250 valid signatures and had to have been filed by February 10.

**Additional nominations for HAA elected director may be made by certificate, signed by regular members of the association in number not less than three-quarters of one percent of the average number of votes cast in the previous three elections. For 2003, the number of signatures needed was 253 and the petition had to have been filed by February 10.
to visit the campus while the academic year is in full swing. Participants may join in undergraduate classes and meet faculty members. The HAA will send a brochure to reunion classes in the Greater Boston area. If you do not receive a copy, and would like to attend the event, contact Michele Carletti, 124 Mount Auburn Street, sixth floor, Cambridge 02138, 617-495-2555, or e-mail michele_carletti@harvard.edu.

Comings and Goings

Local Harvard clubs host numerous lectures and social gatherings throughout the year. A list of some of the events planned for this spring follows. For further details, contact the HAA's clubs and programs office at 617-495-3070 or visit www.haa.harvard.edu.


Harvard at Home

Looking for another intellectual connection to the University? Harvard at Home, an on-line educational venture, offers compact versions of lectures, seminars, conferences, and other events happening on campus.

Among the newest segments available is “The College Experience: A Blueprint for Success” by education professor Richard J. Light. Drawing on information from hundreds of interviews with students, Light examines topics such as academic advising, collaborative learning, living arrangements, and diversity.

Alumni may also experience aspects of the Radcliffe Institute’s “Women, Money, and Power Conference,” held from October 24 to 25, 2002. The first of four on-line programs to be posted on the conference, this segment focuses on women and entrepreneurship in contemporary America, and includes highlights from panel discussions and the keynote address by Pamela Thomas-Graham ’85, M.B.A.-J.D. ’89, president and CEO of CNBC.

Also newly available is a one-hour program featuring Pellegrino University Research professor E.O. Wilson who gives a lecture “On the Relation of Science and the Humanities” (see page 36). Wilson postulates “that genetic evolution and cultural evolution are somehow interwoven. We are only beginning to obtain a glimmer of the nature of this process.” The vignette also features a glossary of terms, slide images, and background information.

To access Harvard at Home, visit http://athome.harvard.edu.

Education opportunities also abound through the Harvard Alumni Association’s Alumni College series. The next one, entitled “What We Know About How We Know: Current Research on the Mind and Brain,” is planned for May 17 in Cambridge. For further information on the event, call 617-495-1093, e-mail haa_alumnicollege@harvard.edu, or visit www.haa.harvard.edu and click on the heading “Alumni College.”