

climate change film free of charge and discuss the issues

the Royal College of General Practitioners, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and the NHS Sustainable Development Unit—to pay a licence fee for showing the film.

A spokesman for the Sustainable Development Unit said that any NHS staff who wanted to see the film could do so by going to www.indiescreenings.net/website and using an NHS email address to ask for a DVD copy of the film, thus only

having to pay a £6 administration fee.

Screening of the DVD for colleagues, students, and inpatients could then take place at any NHS workplace or royal college venue, after which the DVD has to be returned.

“We would like them also to have a discussion after watching the film about the issues and come back to us with their thoughts,” said the spokesman.

David Pencheon, the unit’s director, said, “It is not often

that all NHS staff get to watch a movie blockbuster for free, but the Sustainable Development Unit and its partners feel that this film highlights the threat of a climate crisis particularly well.

“We now know that climate change is the most serious strategic health threat we face globally and nationally. Part of the process of addressing this is that all NHS healthcare professionals need to understand what role they can play as part of one

of the world’s largest organisations.

“This film is a powerful part of an awareness raising campaign for doctors and other health professionals to understand the seriousness of this issue, and doctors need to speak out about it.”

Anyone who wants to register to take part in the *BMJ* webcast discussion should go to www.visualwebcaster.com/event.asp?id=59903.

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Action is needed to prevent deaths among Himalayan pilgrims, says climbing federation

Siddhartha Yadav KATHMANDU

At least 10 pilgrims have died over the past three weeks while visiting the Kailash Manasarovar area in Tibet, which is at an altitude of over 4500 m. The medical commission of the International Mountaineering and Climbing Federation has called for urgent action to prevent such deaths.

The pilgrims are said to have died of altitude related illnesses and worsening of other conditions. Dozens of other pilgrims with serious altitude related illnesses had to be rescued by helicopter.

The area, believed to be the abode of the Hindu god Shiva, is visited by thousands of pilgrims annually, mostly from India and Nepal. The Indian government and private tour operators conduct pilgrimages to this site, although the government ones are limited to only a thousand Indian citizens selected through a prize draw.

Most of the pilgrims had ascended very rapidly and were unable to acclimatise to the altitude, leading to life threatening conditions such as high altitude cerebral oedema and high altitude pulmonary oedema.

Buddha Basnyat, president of the federation’s medical commission, said, “Most pilgrims are unaware of the symptoms and prevention of altitude related illnesses, and they rapidly ascend to a high altitude by helicopter, plane, or vehicle.

Dr Basnyat added: “Unlike younger tourists or climbers, pilgrims are generally older and suffer from illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, or heart diseases that make them more prone to problems from these condi-



CHINA PHOTOS/STRINGER/GETTY IMAGES

Tibetan pilgrims rest on their journey to Mount Kailash, which stands at over 4500 m

tions because of relative lack of oxygen.”

The problem is compounded by the fact that many pilgrims consider it inauspicious to discontinue a pilgrimage because of an illness. Furthermore, pilgrimage sites have rudimentary rescue facilities, and many pilgrims travel without insurance. These factors contribute to delays in seeking care or make rescue operations difficult.

The medical commission says that to prevent deaths pilgrims and tour operators need better education and greater awareness of prevention and treatment of altitude related illnesses.

“Because they are older and may have comorbid conditions, screening a pilgrim

for fitness may be a consideration. But the important point is that sudden ascent needs to be avoided,” Dr Basnyat said.

The Indian government’s route through the Lipulekh pass between India and Tibet has a gradual ascent, but the private tour operators usually prefer faster routes in which altitude is gained rapidly, taking just two days to ascend from an altitude of 1300 m to 4400 m.

Besides the Kailash Manasarovar area, pilgrims visit the Amarnath cave in India (at nearly 4000 m), Lake Gosaikunda in Nepal (4380 m), and many other religious places and lakes.

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