

Responding to climate change

October 2019

RCN POSITION STATEMENT



Introduction

We are entering a period of unprecedented environmental breakdown. Human activity is changing the planet's biosphere bringing disruption to planetary health through climate change, air pollution, ocean acidification, deforestation, and loss of biodiversity.

As a UK-wide organisation, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) recognises that climate change undermines the very foundations of our health. We are already experiencing the negative consequences on people's wellbeing, this is growing and is set to be catastrophic if we do not act now. The World Health Organisation has described climate change as "the defining health challenge of our time".

Nurses have a duty to protect and promote public health in the face of these threats and have a unique and vital role to play. Their expertise, diverse roles and the trust invested in them mean they can be leaders in protecting the health of the public from the consequences of climate change. The RCN acknowledges and endorses the climate emergency declared by the UK Government and commits to engage with our members and take action on this issue on behalf of them and the profession.

The RCN is also clear that initiatives that protect our planet and mitigate climate change are also good for our wider population's health and therefore investment in action now will bring multiple benefits and value in future years to our personal lives and health care provision in the future.

Context

As the largest profession delivering, influencing and leading health and care globally¹; nursing and midwifery is uniquely placed to advocate, educate and lead action to mitigate risks associated with global temperature increases, improving the health and well-being of UK and international patients and citizens.

RCN members recognise the importance of health and social care providers acting on climate change now for the benefit of health and social care recipients, population health and sustainability of the health care workforce.

There are moral, ethical and economic benefits for investing in actions to mitigate global warming and its associated impact. Tackling climate change cannot be managed in isolation and will require collaboration between civil society, health, social care and industry; supported and enabled by strong Government policies aimed at protecting those most vulnerable to its effects.

The Royal College of Nursing recognises the devolved rights and responsibilities of each UK country to act autonomously to meet the requirements of the UK Climate Change Act (2008) and other legislation for sustainable development such as the Climate Change (Scotland) Act 2009, and The Well-being of Future Generations Act (2015). It welcomes the statements by the Scottish² and Welsh³ Governments to declare a climate emergency, and action by the UK Government to bring forward legislation to set a Net Zero target into law to meet net zero emissions by 2050⁴.

How health and social care providers can support action on climate change

Public and private health and social care provides employment for approximately 3 million people or 1 in 10 of the working population⁵. Health and social care providers, including those in nursing and midwifery roles, can have significant influence driving changes to help us practice, work and live in more sustainable ways. The decision of RCN Congress to prioritise action on climate change acknowledges the close relationship between climate, health and our ability to meet future health and care needs.

The health sector, whose mission is protecting and promoting health, makes a major contribution to the climate crisis and therefore must play their part in resolving it.

Health care's climate footprint globally is equivalent to 4.4% of global net emissions. The NHS produces higher emissions than the global average for health care and is responsible for 5.4% of the UK's total carbon emissions, equivalent to the greenhouse gas emissions of 11 coal-fired power stations⁶.

Over the next six months the RCN will refine its key climate change objectives in line with its strategic support of the declared climate emergency.

Priorities for consideration and action

The RCN will focus on a number of approaches to shape consultation with its members and stakeholders across the UK including:

- placing health and social inequalities at the heart of climate change activity
- identifying and sharing practical ways in which members can engage and contribute proactively with the Royal College and influence employers to adopt innovative actions such as the 'Clean Air Hospital' framework⁷ and RCN Glove Awareness Campaign⁸
- lobbying for accelerating sustainable procurement, specifically for items used by nurses and midwives to deliver care
- lobbying for closer alignment and

transparency of UK Government policies and budgets where mutual benefits exist, for example the alignment of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and sustainability policies⁹

- supporting and strengthening relationships with stakeholders advocating on behalf of health institutions such as the UK Healthcare Alliance on Climate Change (UKHACC) to maximise co-ordinated action and impact to protect and promote public health
- showcasing the contribution of nursing and midwifery alongside the UN Climate Change Conference to be held in Glasgow in 2020.

In addition to these actions the RCN acknowledges the need to investigate the impact of our institution to better understand our environmental impact and agree actions to reduce the RCN's carbon footprint.

Finally, the RCN recognises the importance of understanding how climate change is, and will affect our patients and our members and we commit to working with others to understand this and initiate conversations about how climate change will fit into the workplace in the coming years.

Closing Statement

Balancing the risks of climate change and the need for immediate action will be challenging for the RCN and its members. RCN Congress has taken this first step and this statement confirms our intention to act. There is personal action that individual nurses can take, changes and action that the RCN can make, and we commit to use our joint voice and advocacy power to ensure that Government plays its part. Nurses can protect the health of the public and influence change but we must act now.

'It is not too late to make a difference, but only if we start now at every level from local to global'.

Sir Bob Watson Ex Chair Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

References

- ¹ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Global Health (2016) Triple Impact Report. Available at https://www.who.int/hrh/com-heeg/digital-APPG_triple-impact.pdf (accessed 23 September 2019)
- ² Scottish Government news (2019) <https://www.gov.scot/news/action-to-address-climate-emergency/> (accessed 23 September 2019)
- ³ Welsh Government announcement on climate change <https://gov.wales/welsh-government-makes-climate-emergency-declaration> (accessed 23 September 2019)
- ⁴ Committee on Climate Change (2019) [https://www.theccc.org.uk/2019/06/11/response-to-government-plan-to-legislate-for-netzero-emissions-target/](https://www.theccc.org.uk/2019/06/11/response-to-government-plan-to-legislate-for-net-zero-emissions-target/)
- ⁵ Kings Fund (2013) Overview of the health and social care workforce <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/time-think-differently/trends-workforce-overview>
- ⁶ Health Care's Climate Footprint: Health Care Without Harm, ARUP Sept 2019
- ⁷ Clean Air Hospital Framework <https://www.globalactionplan.org.uk/clean-air-hospital-framework/> (accessed 23 September 2019)
- ⁸ Royal College of Nursing Glove Awareness Campaign www.rcn.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/glove-awareness (accessed 23 September 2019)
- ⁹ Davies, SC (2019) Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer, 2019 Health, our global asset – partnering for progress, Department of Health and Social Care.

Further reading

Committee on Climate Change
www.theccc.org.uk/tackling-climate-change/the-legal-landscape/the-climate-change-act

World Health Organisation Climate Change and Human health
www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health

UK Healthcare Alliance on Climate Change (UKHACC) www.ukhealthalliance.org

Welsh Government Environment and climate change
<https://gov.wales/environment-climate-change>

Sustainable Development Unit www.sduhealth.org.uk

Climate change adaptation in Scotland <https://adaptationscotland.org.uk/why-adapt/legislation/climate-change-adaptation-scotland>