

Taking Action on Climate Change and Health

A Position Paper from the
Royal College of Physicians of Ireland
October 2023



Key Messages

- *The climate crisis is a health crisis, potentially the biggest health crisis of our time.*

- *Worldwide, increasingly frequent extreme weather events like heatwaves, wildfires, and flooding are resulting in illness, death, and damage to healthcare infrastructure.*

- *Burning of fossil fuels contributes to increases in stroke, heart disease, lung cancer and COPD. Around 1000 premature deaths could be prevented every year on the island of Ireland if air pollution levels below the recommended World Health Organisation limit were achieved.*

- *Healthcare delivery itself contributes significantly to global heating. If the healthcare sector were a country, it would be the 5th largest polluter in the world.*

- *Moving towards a healthcare system based on primary prevention of disease is necessary to reduce the carbon footprint in healthcare.*

- *Strong and urgent leadership is now required from leaders in Irish healthcare to highlight and act on the imminent danger that climate breakdown poses to health.*

- *At both the individual and organizational level healthcare workers can make a difference, with the right leadership, support, and education.*

RCPI calls on those in leadership positions in healthcare to prioritise planetary health and to take decisive actions towards meeting 2030 and 2050 carbon targets within the Irish Health Service.

RCPI commits to:

1. Raising professional awareness of climate breakdown.
2. Leading health sector changes to reduce carbon emissions and to implement sustainable healthcare practices.
3. Building awareness and capacity among healthcare professionals through medical education, continuing professional development, and professional guidance.



“An unprecedented challenge demands an unprecedented response, and it will take the work of the 7.5 billion people currently alive to ensure that the health of a child born today is not defined by a changing climate.” (2019 Lancet Countdown report on health and climate change)

The Climate Crisis

Increasingly frequent heatwaves, flooding, droughts, and wildfires across the world in recent years provide indisputable evidence of global heating and climate breakdown. A 2023 major climate study reported that our planet is on course to cross multiple tipping points beyond liveable conditions for societies (1,2). It is essential that we meet the goals of the 2015 Paris Agreement (3), which pledged to limit global heating to 1.5 degrees above pre-industrial levels to mitigate the worst effects of global heating and save millions of lives worldwide.

The climate crisis is a health crisis

Climate breakdown and human health are highly interwoven. The health effects of fossil fuel combustion - the greatest contributor to global heating - include increased rates of acute and chronic cardio-respiratory illness and stroke. Around 1000 premature deaths could be prevented every year on the island of Ireland if air pollution levels below the recommended World Health Organisation limit were achieved (4). Health effects of extreme weather events include hypothermia, dehydration, renal disease, stroke, malnutrition, and water-borne infections (5).

The paradox is that healthcare delivery itself contributes significantly to global heating. If the healthcare sector were a country, it would be the 5th largest polluter in the world (6). We thus need to work towards ensuring adequate capacity to respond to the health effects of climate breakdown, while at the same time addressing the environmental impact of the healthcare sector.

Statements and strategies regarding health and climate have been published by Irish medical professional bodies such as the Irish College of General Practitioners (7), College of Anaesthesiologists of Ireland (8) and the Irish Society of Public Health Specialists (9). The Royal College of Physicians of Ireland now wishes to add its voice to these groups, to increase awareness amongst its membership and to advocate for the provision of climate-informed, sustainable healthcare in Ireland for the benefit of our patients, our country, and our planet.

Ireland's declaration of a climate emergency is not being acted upon

In 2019, the Irish Government declared a climate and biodiversity emergency, being just the second country in the world to do so. Despite this, in 2020, Ireland had the second highest greenhouse gas emissions (GHGe) per capita in the EU (10). Ireland continues to remain excessively dependent on fossil fuels for energy (11).

The UK National Health Service (NHS) in 2020 published its comprehensive strategy “Delivering a Net Zero NHS” (12), and targets for carbon emissions reduction have already been reached (13). By contrast, the Irish health service has not yet begun to realise similar goals. A leadership gap exists within Irish healthcare due to the absence of a true sense of the urgency of action required, as well as an inability to transcend bureaucratic barriers. The response to the COVID 19 pandemic has demonstrated that this need not be the case. Similar strong and urgent leadership is now required from healthcare leaders to highlight and act on the imminent danger that climate breakdown poses to health.



A transition from bystander to activist

"COP26 has made some progress, but nowhere near enough to avoid climate disaster. While millions around the world are already in crisis, not enough leaders were in crisis mode. People will see this as a historically shameful dereliction of duty."

(Former President of Ireland, Mary Robinson)

The Royal College of Physicians of Ireland recognises the urgent need for a transition from bystander to activist, both for RCPI as an organisation and for our members as individuals. Activism and change require collaboration and we will work with other healthcare stakeholders to achieve the changes needed. Healthcare professionals, with their trusted roles in society and within organisations and communities, are increasingly recognised as leading voices in planetary health.

Some initial work has already been done in RCPI. We have held educational events on climate change[1] and we have formed alliances[2] to advocate for Government action. We're delivering more courses and exams remotely, with a significant reduction in carbon footprint. RCPI investments are managed by an ethical investment strategy that considers environmental impact, our IT department promotes Green IT initiatives, and efforts are made to reduce energy use in RCPI's buildings and to promote recycling and use of sustainable materials/supplies. Through the Forum of Postgraduate Training Bodies, we support the development of a global health curriculum which includes a climate change module.

Now we formally commit to action to mitigate the effects of climate breakdown on health and to reduce the carbon emissions associated with the delivery of healthcare.

[1] Green Health Symposium in 2019, sessions on climate change in 2022 conferences of both Faculty of Public Health Medicine and Faculty of Occupational Medicine

RCPI commitments to protect planetary health ⁱⁱⁱ

1. We will raise professional awareness of climate breakdown through publication of this position paper. We will disseminate the paper to our membership and seek endorsement by other medical training bodies.

2. We will call on those in leadership positions in healthcare to prioritise planetary health and to take decisive actions towards meeting 2030 and 2050 carbon targets within the Irish Health Service.

3. Through our membership, we will lead changes in the health sector to reduce carbon emissions and to implement sustainable healthcare practices. Specifically, we will:
 - Advocate for a move towards a healthcare system based on primary prevention of disease, rather than the existing system based on treatment of disease
 - Convene an RCPI working group with cross-faculty membership
 - Ensure RCPI representation in national health sector planning relating to climate and sustainability, supporting the HSE to reach its 2050 carbon neutral target
 - Develop a roadmap to Net Zero emissions for RCPI
 - Engage and collaborate with other postgraduate training bodies to lead changes in healthcare sustainability
 - Advocate for Green Healthcare, particularly focusing on waste reduction, the minimisation of single-use items and Green Procurement

4. We will build awareness and capacity among healthcare professionals regarding environmentally sustainable healthcare by:
 - Integrating healthcare sustainability into both Basic and Higher Specialist Training curricula
 - Providing clear guidance on how each specialty can maximise environmentally sustainable practice
 - Scheduling CPD events on planetary health and sustainable healthcare practices
 - Embedding the theme of sustainability into a range of conferences hosted by RCPI and its Faculties and Institutes
 - Dissemination of advice for RCPI members on how they can be sustainability champions in their own workplaces.

ⁱⁱⁱ Approved by RCPI Council in May 2023

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