Sustainable & Green Strategies

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Why Climate-Smart Healthcare Must Be a Priority

As a healthcare leader, you have the responsibility and opportunity to take action against climate change and prioritise zero emissions for your hospital.

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> **key points**
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> - By taking climate action, healthcare can seize the opportunity to combat the greatest threat to human health and protect an already overstretched sector.
> - You don't have to do it alone. Hospitals across Europe are already successfully implementing climate solutions, putting them on the path to net zero healthcare.
> - By creating a climate-smart hospital, you can drive change across your organisation and become a role model for an entire health system, region, or even country.

Climate-smart healthcare is no longer a nice to have - it must be the norm across European healthcare operations to protect both people and the planet. Climate change is the greatest threat to human health we face today. As a healthcare leader, you have both the responsibility and opportunity to take action to address this threat and make zero emissions a priority for your hospital.

Climate change is perceived by many as a distant risk - a problem that will affect future generations, often in far-flung places. However, we continue to have global temperature records being broken every summer in Europe - leading to tens of thousands of excess deaths from heat-related illnesses and unprecedented environmental destruction causing harm and disruption to local communities.

Climate change's impact on human health is increasingly visible through injuries, illness, and death caused by extreme weather events and the spread of infectious disease vectors. This places an unprecedented burden on an already overstretched healthcare sector.

Protecting Patients and the Planet

Climate change presents a unique set of challenges for the healthcare sector. While it is busy treating the growing health impacts associated with a changing climate, it also directly contributes to climate change. Healthcare is responsible for 5% of global net emissions. If it were a country, it would be the fifth largest emitter on the planet. Without action, these emissions could triple by 2050.

This presents a huge opportunity for you. By taking immediate climate action, you can fight one of the biggest challenges facing healthcare while at the same time setting an example for other sectors to build a future that is better for people and the planet.

Future-Proofing Healthcare Services

As well as reducing their emissions, healthcare services need to prepare for the challenges and disruption that climate change presents. The rising frequency of extreme weather events is already affecting healthcare services operationally, financially, and structurally. Climate-related disasters negatively impact medical equipment, impede laboratory testing, and present a serious risk to vulnerable patients.

Healthcare workers are also at risk - climate change negatively affects health professionals' mental health, increases their already heavy workload, and requires them to operate during times of crisis more frequently. As frontline staff, they see the health impacts of climate

change in their patients firsthand while at the same time recognising the sector's role in the crisis. Healthcare professionals are actively calling for change both within and beyond the sector. Prioritising climate action allows you to respond to that call and put their needs first.

Healthcare Climate Action

Hospitals across Europe are already successfully implementing climate solutions, putting them on the path to net zero healthcare. Several hospitals in Spain and the UK are electrifying their fleets and improving charging infrastructure to address the significant emissions from their ambulances. Operating theatres also present a major source of emissions. Hospitals are

and develop carbon management plans. Through this project, one hospital has put 11 other hospitals on the path to zero emissions healthcare.

The Scottish Government's National Green Theatres Programme started as a tiny change made in one surgical theatre by one clinical team and then grew into a national initiative. One team replacing desflurane and nitrous oxide with sevoflurane, which has a lower carbon footprint, at Raigmore Hospital turned into the larger Green Theatre project, which outlines ten simple actions any operating theatre can introduce to reduce its environmental impact. Due to the project's success, it was adopted by the Scottish Government and became the National Green Theatres Programme.

> ## Each additional hospital that commits to driving zero-emissions healthcare can snowball progress across the entire sector

cutting out unnecessary plastic packaging, medical trays, and anaesthetic gases with a high carbon footprint, while others are addressing emissions by turning off ventilation and anaesthesia gas scavenging systems out of hours.

Other hospitals are spearheading campaigns to shift away from single-use items and unnecessary pharmaceutical waste. A region in Denmark is funding initiatives to reduce waste and unnecessary items during medical procedures. Disposable bedsheets, single-use cups, and pharmaceutical waste due to expired medicines are all being targeted by this campaign.

These are just a few of the inspiring projects happening across Europe. We already know the how. What we need now is widespread action. Each additional hospital that commits to driving zero-emissions healthcare can snowball progress across the entire sector.

One Hospital Can Change An Entire System

As a healthcare leader, you can determine the future direction of your organisation, but you can also have a lasting impact across the wider sector. One hospital can become a role model for an entire health system, region, or even country. With HCWH Europe's support, Lluís Alcanyís Hospital of Xàtiva supported 11 hospitals in the Valencia region to calculate their healthcare emissions

Driving Change for Net Zero Healthcare

Healthcare leaders can drive this change within their healthcare facilities and make net zero emissions possible. Every European hospital must prioritise climate-smart healthcare and integrate sustainability into its daily operations. By measuring your emissions, developing a net zero strategy, and setting up green teams, healthcare leaders can mainstream this in the everyday working environment of healthcare staff.

The good news is that you don't need to do this alone. You can consult the many resources and templates for building carbon management plans, green teams, and targeting specific emissions already available. European healthcare providers can also exchange knowledge, learn from each other, and replicate successes. HCWH Europe's Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network offers networking opportunities and critical resources to support you on this journey.

Building a climate-smart hospital that prioritises carbon reduction and climate resilience is not only achievable but also a crucial step towards building a healthier future for both people and the planet.

Conflict of Interest

None. ■