



UK HEALTH
ALLIANCE ON
CLIMATE CHANGE

GMC Good Medical Practice Review: Response

Proposal

The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change is an alliance of health organisations including Royal Colleges, Faculties, Student Organisations, British Medical Association, Academy of Medical Sciences, Royal Society of Medicine, British Medical Journal, and the Lancet. The total membership of our members is 950,000 health professionals. As an alliance, we advocate for just responses to the climate and ecological crisis, promote the health benefits that flow from those responses, and empower members and health professionals to make changes in their professional and personal lives to respond to the crisis.

Frontline health workers provide a vital role in enabling the systemic and cultural changes that are needed to mitigate, adapt and reduce the health burden of the climate crisis. The UK government has recently published guidance (Government, 2022)¹ for health professionals to act on the climate crisis in their professional practice.

The GMC Good Medical Practice Review provides an opportunity to position sustainability as a core focus of practice, acknowledging the ethical and moral duty of doctors to play their part in averting a global humanitarian disaster. In order to achieve this, we recommend the introduction of a fifth domain on ‘sustainability’ in the Good Medical Practice Guidelines.

The Good Medical Practice Review provides an opportunity for the GMC to play a significant part in what could be the most exciting and positive transformation in human history, while also averting a health catastrophe, saving potentially billions of lives. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has warned that timing is crucial. Action is needed now and cannot wait another five years for the next update. We make this proposal with respect to the many other pressures currently facing frontline doctors, and the recognition that this is a global health emergency. The positive impacts of adding a fifth domain are:

1. Medical appraisal is usually based on the GMP domains. Inclusion of a domain on sustainability will help mobilise the medical workforce to support decarbonisation of health care. The NHS will struggle to achieve its net zero targets without this level of engagement by clinical teams given that more than two thirds of the NHS carbon footprint relates to clinical activity².
2. It would make a clear public statement, using the trusted voice of the medical profession, regarding the urgency and importance of action of the climate crisis.

We respectfully request that you consider this submission in your deliberations regarding review of the Good Medical Practice Guidelines.

¹ [Climate and Health: Applying All Our Health](#)

² [Greener NHS » Delivering a net zero NHS \(england.nhs.uk\)](#)

Draft domain

We include below a draft for a new sustainability domain for your consideration.

TOP SECTION of GMP document

Patients must be able to trust doctors with their lives and health. To justify that trust you must show respect for all human life and make sure your practice meets the standards expected of you in **five** domains.

Knowledge, skills and performance - etc

Safety and quality

■ Take prompt action if you think that patient **or public** safety, dignity or comfort is being compromised.

etc

Maintaining trust -etc

Sustainability

■ Be aware of the impact of your treatment choices on the environment and how this may affect the health of the local and global population

■ Practice environmentally, socially and financially sustainable healthcare (ref WHO 'A vision for an environmentally sustainable health system is put forth, as being a **health system that improves, maintains or restores health**, while minimizing negative impacts on the environment and leveraging opportunities to restore and improve it, to the benefit of the health and well-being of current and future generations. [Environmentally sustainable health systems: a strategic document \(who.int\)](#))

Domain 5: Sustainability

Practice sustainably to protect patients, the wider community and the environment, both now and in the future.

1. You must take steps
 - a. To develop your understanding of the links between climate change, environmental degradation, nature and human health.
 - b. To reduce the contribution of the health sector to climate change and environmental degradation.
 - c. To apply basic carbon literacy as it applies to healthcare.
2. You should exploit opportunities to promote actions that both reduce carbon emissions and benefit public health (e.g. active transport, sustainable diets³).
3. You should practice sustainably by avoiding unnecessary tests, procedures and prescriptions; stopping ineffective treatments and minimising waste; using online services when appropriate to reduce travel to appointments.
4. Wherever possible and appropriate provide the treatment with the lowest carbon footprint (where data on this is available).
5. Take part in sustainable quality improvement to minimise environmental and financial impacts and seek positive emotional and social impact⁴.

³ [The Planetary Health Diet - EAT \(eatforum.org\)](https://eatforum.org/)

⁴ [Home | Sustainable Quality Improvement \(susqi.org\)](https://susqi.org/)

Rationale

The climate and ecological crises constitute unprecedented and potentially catastrophic threats to human health^{5,6}.

Health Impacts are already being observed and will worsen as global temperatures and biodiversity loss increases. These include:

- Threats to the supply of fresh water⁷ and food systems⁸ - threatening to reverse progress on sustainable development goals including efforts to reduce poverty and malnutrition.
- Air pollution (indoor and outdoor), primarily from burning fossil fuels - currently estimated to be associated with more than seven million premature deaths each year⁹, in addition to wider impacts on quality of life and health throughout peoples lifespan¹⁰.
- Increases in infectious diseases - vector and waterborne diseases¹¹ and pandemic risk¹²
- Increases in frequency and severity of extreme weather events¹³, both acute (e.g. heatwaves, storms, floods, wildfires) and chronic (e.g. drought) leading to associated injury, trauma, mental health problems, displacement¹⁴, climate-related migration and conflict¹⁵ over dwindling resources.
- Rising sea levels are destroying homes and livelihoods; putting major coastal cities¹⁶ and entire nations at risk^{17,18}.
- Impacts on mental health¹⁹ - post-traumatic stress, anxiety and various forms of eco-distress²⁰.

Equality and Justice. Around the world, even in wealthier nations such as the UK, it is the most vulnerable – the poorest communities, black, indigenous, and people of colour (in the global south and industrialised nations²¹), people with disabilities²², women²³ and children²⁴, who are already bearing the majority of the burden of health harms and are most at risk as the situation worsens. Children and young people are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change by virtue of their physiology, dependency, more direct interaction with the environment, mental health impacts, and the cumulative effects of them being exposed to climate change impacts over many years. As these groups are also the least responsible for these linked crises, failing to take the necessary steps to address them constitutes racial, gender-based, intergenerational and social injustice.

⁵ [The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change](#)

⁶ [Climate change \(who.int\)](#)

⁷ [High and Dry : Climate Change, Water, and the Economy \(worldbank.org\)](#)

⁸ [Chapter 5 : Food Security — Special Report on Climate Change and Land \(ipcc.ch\)](#)

⁹ [Air pollution \(who.int\)](#)

¹⁰ [Every breath we take: the lifelong impact of air pollution | RCP London](#)

¹¹ [The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change](#)

¹² [Preventing the next pandemic - Zoonotic diseases and how to break the chain of transmission | UNEP - UN Environment Programme](#)

¹³ [How is climate linked to extreme weather? - Met Office](#)

¹⁴ [Climate change is displacing 20 million people each year, Oxfam study shows | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#)

¹⁵ [Climate change raises conflict concerns \(unesco.org\)](#)

¹⁶ [Which Coastal Cities Are at Highest Risk of Damaging Floods? New Study Crunches the Numbers \(worldbank.org\)](#)

¹⁷ [Climate Change: Global Sea Level | NOAA Climate.gov](#)

¹⁸ [Sea-level rise and human migration | Nature Reviews Earth & Environment](#)

¹⁹ [The College's position on Sustainability | Royal College of Psychiatrists \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](#)

²⁰ https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3918955

²¹ [Why climate change is inherently racist - BBC Future](#)

²² [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology-health-care/sites/epidemiology_health_care/files/disability_and_climate_justice_research_project_final_to_share.pdf)

[care/sites/epidemiology_health_care/files/disability_and_climate_justice_research_project_final_to_share.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/epidemiology_health_care/sites/epidemiology_health_care/files/disability_and_climate_justice_research_project_final_to_share.pdf)

²³ [Understanding Why Climate Change Impacts Women More Than Men \(globalcitizen.org\)](#)

²⁴ [UNICEF-climate-crisis-child-rights-crisis.pdf](#)

The Goal

“The science is unequivocal; a global increase of 1.5°C above the pre-industrial average and the continued loss of biodiversity risk catastrophic harm to health that will be impossible to reverse”²⁵

In 2015, governments committed to do what was required to keep global temperature rise below 2 degrees, aiming for 1.5 degrees²⁶. A subsequent IPCC report²⁷ highlighted the importance of aiming for 1.5 degrees in terms of severity of impacts.

There remains uncertainty about the point at which positive feedbacks in the earth’s systems (e.g. loss of the albedo effect of ice cover, release of methane from the arctic regions, loss of forests and ocean acidification) lead to ‘runaway’ global warming, outside human control. It is vital to limit global heating below this point. To date observational data at just above 1 degree of warming, exceeds some of the worst case scenario predictions for such changes. In line with the precautionary principle, limiting global heating to 1.5 degrees as a maximum²⁸ is therefore the wisest course. To achieve this requires a 7-8% reduction in global emissions annually, which necessitates immediate and system wide change²⁹.

Why doctors need to be involved

1. **The healthcare system is vulnerable** to the impacts of climate change in terms of
 - increased burden of disease (e.g. pandemics, heatwaves, health impacts of air pollution and extreme weather etc),
 - extreme weather causing damage to healthcare facilities (e.g. recent partial evacuation of Whipps Cross in London due to flooding), impacting local transport and communication systems and freshwater and power supplies,
 - Impacts on supply chains due to events elsewhere.
2. **The healthcare system is also culpable**, an uncomfortable irony for an industry based on the principle of ‘first do no harm’. In addition to a significant contribution to pollution from waste, in industrialised nations the health sector contributes 5-10% of greenhouse gas emissions. Globally, if the health sector were a country, it would rank as the 5th largest emitter, just behind Japan³⁰.
3. **There are huge potential health co-benefits³¹** of actions to avert climate and ecological disaster, particularly in terms of reductions in non-communicable disease and improving the standard of living and wellbeing for the wider population³², as well as the benefits to the health economy and efficiency of care.
4. **Doctors are one of the most trusted voices³³** for communicating important health information. We understand complex systems and feedback loops. We understand the importance of rapid responses in emergency situations. We are skilled at communicating complex science in lay terms for the public. In the face of widespread ignorance and politicisation of this science-based threat we have a moral duty to use our trusted voices to raise awareness.

²⁵ [Call for emergency action to limit global temperature increases, restore biodiversity, and protect health | The BMJ](#)

²⁶ [The Paris Agreement | UNFCCC](#)

²⁷ [Global Warming of 1.5 °C — \(ipcc.ch\)](#)

²⁸ [Climate Code Red: WHAT LIES BENEATH](#)

²⁹ [AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis — IPCC](#)

³⁰ [Health care climate footprint report | Health Care Without Harm \(noharm-uscanada.org\)](#)

³¹ [Mapping the co-benefits of climate change action to issues of public concern in the UK: a narrative review - The Lancet Planetary Health](#)

³² [Health co-benefits of climate action \(who.int\)](#)

³³ [Ipsos Veracity Index 2020 | Ipsos](#)

Sustainable healthcare³⁴ does not mean lowering the quality of care and can often improve it whilst also reducing expenditure. A sustainable approach means engaging with the wider system to prioritise interventions which prevent disease and empower patients to play a larger role in managing their own conditions. This has potential to address the health inequities highlighted by the recent Marmot report³⁵. It requires a shift in focus to take account of the impacts of treatment choices on the population (local, and global) which we serve as well as the needs of individual patients. It involves reducing healthcare related activity by:

- streamlining pathways (reducing low value activity including unnecessary tests, procedures and prescriptions, travel and appointments) and
- minimising waste

This reduces unnecessary negative impacts on patients and frees up capacity in the system whilst often reducing financial outlay. For activity which needs to continue, treatments with lowest carbon footprint and environmental impact are chosen where safe and appropriate.

Response of the health community The scale of the threat and the urgent need for action has been recognised by the NHS which has, in all four UK nations, pledged to achieve net zero by 2045^{36,37,38,39}.

Numerous Royal Colleges and other health organisations have declared a climate emergency or made equivalent statements and most are members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate change⁴⁰. Recently over 220 medical journals published the same editorial⁴¹ urging world leaders to act on climate change. This is unprecedented and reflects the scale of concern in the health community. The Royal College of Physicians has named sustainability a seventh domain of quality in healthcare, “which must run through and moderate other domains”⁴².

³⁴ [Sustainability in quality improvement: redefining value \(nih.gov\)](#)

³⁵ [Health Equity in England: The Marmot Review 10 Years On - The Health Foundation](#)

³⁶ [NHS England » NHS becomes the world’s first national health system to commit to become ‘carbon net zero’, backed by clear deliverables and milestones](#)

³⁷ [NHS Scotland climate emergency and sustainability strategy 2022 to 2026 - draft: consultation - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](#)

³⁸ [NHS Wales Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery Plan \(gov.wales\)](#)

³⁹ [Net Zero NHS | Climate Northern Ireland](#)

⁴⁰ [Members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change](#)

⁴¹ [Climate crisis: Over 200 health journals urge world leaders to tackle “catastrophic harm” | The BMJ](#)

⁴² [Sustainability in quality improvement: redefining value | RCP Journals](#)

Members of the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change are:

Academy of Medical Sciences
Association of Anaesthetists
Association of Clinical Psychologists
Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland
British Association of Critical Care Nurses
British Medical Journal
British and Irish Association of Stroke Physicians
British Medical Association
British Thoracic Society
British Society of Gastroenterology
College of Paramedics
Faculty of Public Health
Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Health
Intensive Care Society
The Lancet
Nursing Standard Journal
Plant-Based Health Professionals UK
Primary Care Respiratory Society
Royal Pharmaceutical Society
Royal College of Emergency Medicine
Royal College of General Practitioners
Royal College of Nursing
Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists
Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh
Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow
Royal College of Physicians, London
Royal College of Psychiatrists
Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh
Royal College of Surgeons of England
Royal College of Veterinary Science
Royal Society of Medicine
Students for Global Health