

# Position statement: planetary health and sustainable healthcare in medical education standards and outcomes

## Summary

The global climate and ecological crisis is one of the greatest threats to health that we face. It impacts health and wellbeing in the UK in multiple, significant ways. The healthcare system is a significant contributor.

We recognise that we can make an important contribution to creating a more sustainable healthcare system in the UK. We are therefore committed to working with stakeholders across medical education to identify where teaching can include education for sustainable healthcare (ESH) and planetary health concepts.

This position paper outlines the key concepts related to this workstream; other activity relating to sustainability, climate change and net zero; and our position on the future of the planetary health and ESH work, including how we intend to build these concepts into our review of standards and outcomes.

## Climate, health and healthcare

There is extensive evidence that global environmental changes caused by human activities cause death and ill health. The burning of fossil fuels is a cause of global heating, which increases heatwaves, storms and floods, as well as air pollution locally. For example, the Chief Medical Officer for England's [2022 Annual Report: Air Pollution](#) found between 26,000 and 38,000 deaths a year in England could be attributed to outdoor air pollution. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA)'s [December 2023 report on the Health Effects of Climate Change](#) (HECC) also shows the significant impacts on public health due to the warming climate.

The healthcare system contributes significantly to climate change and environmental degradation through greenhouse gas emissions and clinical, chemical and plastic waste. [Around 4–5% of the UK's total carbon footprint can be attributed to healthcare.](#)

In setting the standards and outcomes for UK medical education, we play a vital role in ensuring that doctors enter the workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills and experience to incorporate planetary health and ESH concepts into clinical decision-making.

## Key concepts: planetary health and ESH

Planetary health and ESH are parallel and complementary concepts to describe how the links

---

between climate change and ecosystem disruption, human health and sustainable practices are taught in medical schools.

[The ESH curriculum](#), endorsed by the Medical Schools Council and included as further reading in [Outcomes for graduates](#), provides important definitions:

- ESH is ‘the process of equipping current and future health professionals with the knowledge, values, confidence and capacity to provide environmentally sustainable services through health professions education.’
- Sustainable healthcare ‘focuses on the improvement of health and better delivery of healthcare, rather than late intervention in disease, with resulting benefits to patients and to the environment on which human health depends, thus serving to provide high-quality healthcare now without compromising the ability to meet the health needs of the future.’

Planetary health, a key element of ESH, is defined by the Planetary Health Alliance as ‘[a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on analysing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth’s natural systems on human health and all life on Earth.](#)’ It recognises Earth as a finite resource with fragile natural systems, on which human civilization and health depends.

Overall, ESH spans a broad spectrum of healthcare from disease prevention, adaptation of healthcare provision, to individual patient-care decisions throughout the entire patient pathway.

## What we’re doing now

Our education policy team has been working with representatives of the Planetary Health Report Card (PHRC) – an international student advocacy group evaluating planetary health content in medical school curricula – to identify how more detailed content around planetary health and ESH could be included in our standards, outcomes and guidance.

So far, this work has included:

- convening a focus group with PHRC representatives
- developing a joint presentation for the Developing Excellence in Medical Education Conference
- publishing a [blog post](#)
- presenting this work to our policy community and leadership team.

This planetary health workstream is just one strand of our wider commitment to ensuring the UK healthcare sector – including ourselves – continues to take positive steps to address its impact on the climate and ecosystems.

Internally, we have a [range of activities and initiatives](#) in place, including:

- net zero plan, providing a pathway to becoming a net zero organisation by 2040
- environmental management system, identifying activities that we do that impact the environment

- 
- sustainability working group, responsible for delivery of net zero plan comprised of colleagues from different departments
  - green group, consisting of environmental champions with the aim to create awareness and promote engagement in environmental issues.

In our role as regulator, we took a significant step by including a sustainability duty when we recently updated [Good medical practice](#). The commitment was the result of extensive consultation with key stakeholders including the specialist round table on sustainability. The duty states:

*14. You must make good use of the resources available to you, and provide the best service possible, taking account of your responsibilities to patients and the wider population.*

*15. You should choose sustainable solutions when you're able to, provided these don't compromise care standards. You should consider supporting initiatives to reduce the environmental impact of healthcare.*

The duty balances our expectations that medical doctors should choose sustainable solutions when they are able to, provided these don't compromise care standards, against the fact that many factors about the environmental impact of healthcare are beyond an individual practitioner's control. The inclusion of this duty provides a springboard for further work in this area such as additional resources.

## What next?

It is imperative that medical students receive education in ESH and planetary health concepts to allow them to practise sustainably when possible. Enhanced recognition of planetary health and ESH in our outcomes and standards is a key mechanism for achieving this.

We are committed to exploring how planetary health, ESH and the relevant skills can be incorporated within our education regulatory documents. We will continue to work with representatives of the PHRC and other key stakeholders to achieve this throughout the review period beginning in 2024.

We understand that some carbon intensive activity is currently unavoidable within the healthcare system. We also acknowledge that there are existing time and resource pressures on educators and what they are expected to teach. We will ensure that any expectations placed on the medical schools, educators, students and clinicians we regulate is proportionate and achievable.

The education policy team will continue to ensure the work is aligned with our wider activity around sustainability, net zero, climate change and the implementation of *Good medical practice*.