

Doctors must step up to the challenge of climate change

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Doctors must lead by example on climate change, according to experts in this week's *BMJ*. Health professionals were powerful catalysts in changing society's view of smoking from a normal lifestyle choice to that of a harmful addiction, and they must do the same for climate change, writes Professor Mike Gill from the University of Surrey.

The NHS is the largest public sector contributor to climate change in the UK, responsible for generating over 18 million tonnes of carbon dioxide every year, about 3% of the UK total.

Despite the NHS recently committing to reducing carbon emissions by at least 60% by 2050, it is not enough, argues Gill, immediate and profound changes in behaviour are needed to avoid irreversible climate change.

He believes that a comparable health emergency occurred in the UK in the 1980s with the HIV epidemic. This, he points out, prompted significant action at all levels, including government awareness campaigns, national surveillance of the effects of behaviour, significant funding, and "the acceptance that this was a problem that demanded attention from health professionals".

A similar collective response on climate change is vital, says Gill, this must begin with health professionals showing patients and governments how serious they are about the challenge of climate change.

In a second personal view, Jenny Griffiths and colleagues from the Climate and Health Council and the Health and Sustainability Network, propose ten practical and inexpensive actions for doctors that could, they say, collectively reduce carbon emissions by up to 5 million tonnes a year—the equivalent to the annual carbon emissions of half a million people in the UK.

They suggest for example, advising patients on lower-carbon diets and walking and cycling instead of car travel; health professionals holding meetings by teleconference, videoconference or web-casting and attending fewer international conferences; doctors advocating locally, especially in primary care, to maximise home insulation and uptake of relevant grants; campaigning on an international level for stabilising the population by promoting literacy and female access to birth control; and putting climate change on the agenda of all meetings.

Doctors are still the professionals that the public trust the most and they must use this influence to change people's behaviour to benefit patients' health and reduce carbon emissions, they conclude.

Source: BMJ-British Medical Journal

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