



Climate and the nursing profession

Position Statement

December 2017

The health and well-being of people, indeed their survival, depends fundamentally on a healthy environment: clean atmosphere and water, fertile soils, pollution-free oceans and biological diversity.

Nurses believe that everyone has an obligation to protect and preserve the environment for the benefit of human health.

Nurses have a shared responsibility to sustain and protect the environment, whilst fulfilling their role of promoting, restoring and maintaining health in people.

Nurses have a role in protecting the health of individuals by:

- Seeking to preserve a healthy environment which is fundamental to the health of all communities and future generations;
- Utilising expertise and providing leadership to assist communities to apply the principles of public health in building healthy communities;
- Participating in partnerships to lobby and advocate for actions to reduce impacts on health through environmental changes.

Definition

The interdependence and the interconnectedness of human health with the health of the natural environment is a relationship formally acknowledged by the World Health Organization (WHO) as interrelated with the conditions and resources needed for health. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion states that; *“The fundamental conditions and resources for health are peace, shelter, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity”* (World Health Organization 1986, Prerequisites for Health, para. 4).

Background

In 2012, 12.6 million deaths, representing 23% of all deaths and 22% of the disease burden were attributable to modifiable environmental risks (World Health Organization 2016a).

The WHO has identified that changes in climatic conditions can have three types of health impacts:

1. direct impacts e.g. heat waves
2. health consequences of changes to ecosystems and biological processes e.g. mosquito borne infections, agricultural food yields
3. health consequences of populations who are disrupted or displaced

The threat from environmental degradation to human health and survival has been recognised and expressed by the scientific community (Union of Concerned Scientist) and by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). Human activity is the main cause of environmental degradation.

Changing landscape patterns and biodiversity may be a key contributor to the outbreak of disease. Human-induced land use changes are primary drivers of a range of infections, and land use changes, food production and agricultural changes account for almost half of all global infectious disease emergencies that are transmitted from animals to people (World Health Organization 2016a). Stable ecosystems are vital to sustaining human life. The loss of biodiversity and changes to ecosystems can result in outbreaks of infectious diseases, risk food and nutrition security as well as protection from natural disasters (Romanelli et al. 2015).

Described as the biggest reserve of biodiversity on the planet, oceans and other waterways provide food, medicines, biofuels and other products. They support the breakdown and removal of waste, support climate change mitigation and are valuable resources for tourism and recreation. The Food and Agriculture Organization stated, “the health of our planet as well as our own health and future food security all hinge on how we treat the blue world” (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2014, Foreward, para. 4).

Just as humans impact the environment, the environment impacts humans. Human activity influences the physical environment with resultant impact on peoples' health. Higher temperatures increase both mortality and morbidity (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011). Australia is already the driest inhabited continent on Earth and drought is an important feature of its highly variable climate (Steffen 2015). The relative risk of suicide can increase by up to 15 percent for rural males aged 30–49 as the severity of drought increases (Steffen 2015). The number of weather related natural disasters has tripled since the 1960s and these disasters claim 60,000 deaths each year (World Health Organization 2016b). The environmental influences on the determinants of health include the natural environment, the built environment and the individual's responses to environmental influences (Veitch 2009).

The design and structure of the built environment is an important determinant of lifestyle and health. There are direct associations with illness and mortality, such as motor vehicle accidents, as well as indirect associations, such as encouraging physical activity. The built environment may also affect mental health and child development through a lack of green space, overcrowding and environmental noise (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2011).

That humans impact the environment is undeniable. This impact can be both positive and negative. We have a responsibility to affect the environment in a positive way when possible and reduce our negative impact at every opportunity.

Health in All Policies (HiAP) is an approach to public policies across sectors to improve population health and health equity that takes into account the health implications of decisions, seeks synergies, and avoids harmful health impacts. It provides a means for considering the impact of policies on people's health and health equity regardless of the primary aim of the policy in concern. Good health enhances the quality of life, improves workforce productivity, increases capacity for learning and strengthens families and communities. In an HiAP approach, the aim is that health is an outcome of all policies (World Health Organization 2013).

The link between increasing air pollution and mortality has been well-documented (Cohen et al 2005; Xu et al. 1994). Air pollution is an important global risk factor for disease, with ambient particulate matter ranking 5th on the global ranking of risk factors for total deaths from all causes in 2015 (Health Effects Institute 2017). The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 3 refers to improving health through improving environmental conditions. Specifically, target 3.9 states "By 2030, substantially reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination" (United Nations Statistics Division n.d., p. 4).

Healthcare contributes to the negative impacts on the health of humans and the environment through unhealthy practices such as poor waste management, use of toxic chemicals, unhealthy food choices and reliance on polluting technologies (Health Care Without Harm 2017). However, Health Care Without Harm (2017, What We Do, para. 7) also identified "*that due to its massive buying power, and its mission-driven interest in preventing disease, the health care sector can help shift the entire economy toward sustainable, safer products and practices.*"

Rationale

The Nursing and Midwifery Board of Australia (NMBA 2008, p. 1) *Code of Ethics for nurses* includes the following value statement: "*Nurses value a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable environment promoting health and wellbeing.*"

Human health and the well-being of present and future generations are dependent on restoring and protecting the integrity of the natural systems that support life in the natural environment, and minimising the human impact that negatively affects ecologically sustainable development.

Human survival depends upon the will to take effective action now, to create and sustain a natural environment, which will support health and life on a long-term basis.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) has called on all nurses to be involved in national and multi-sectoral measures to lessen the burden of climate change on the population, particularly those groups in the population who are vulnerable to disease and injury because of low income, limited access to primary health care, infirmity and age. Interdependence and interconnectedness of living things with the natural environment is already conceptualised in nursing theory, which integrates the concepts of person, nursing, health and environment in the concept of holistic practice.

The Australian College of Nursing recommends that:

- The Australian Government fully adopts and implements the June 2017 Climate and Health Alliance's Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia.
- All Australian governments apply a Health in all Policies (HiAP) approach and consider the UN's Sustainable Development Goals for all policy making decisions.
- Nurses become informed advocates on evidence-based climate-related human health risks and build knowledge based on the specific climate related risks impacting their work and communities.
- Nurses seek and support evidence-based research, education and policy initiatives and strategies by governments and/or community groups to address environmental issues.
- Health care providers incorporate sustainability in their strategic plan and promote awareness of environmental health issues through continuing education/in-service programs.
- Accrediting agencies ensure there are environmental standards for the accreditation of health care agencies.
- Nurses utilise expertise and provide leadership to promote health systems adaptation and preparedness. This will address the impacts of climate and strengthen nurse workforce capacity to support public health interventions.
- Embed climate and health education in nursing education programs including continuing professional development programs.

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