

Ethical leadership in emissions reduction

Initial release November 2021

Next review November 2022

KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is committed to supporting the nursing workforce to identify and appropriately respond to climate change health emergencies, emissions reduction targets and activities. Nurses, as the largest group of health professionals, are best placed to champion climate change action as the most critical current and future determinant of health. ACN believes nurse leadership is urgently required to reduce emissions and develop climate resilient health systems.

BACKGROUND

Climate change has been described as a ‘code red for humanity’ (Masson-Delmotte, Zhai, Pirani, Connors, Péan, Berger, Caud, Chen, Goldfarb, Gomis, Huang, Leitzell, Lonnoy, Matthews, Maycock, Waterfield, Yelekçi, Yu & Zhou 2021). Climate change is the statistically significant change observed in weather patterns, temperature, ocean levels, land surfaces and ice sheets over a defined time period (Australian Academy of Science 2021). Recent climate change caused by increased atmospheric concentration of greenhouse gases (GHGs) is the direct result of human activity (Masson-Delmotte et al 2021; United Nations 1992). The evidence for climate change is unequivocal – atmospheric and ocean temperatures have increased, the polar caps are melting, and sea levels are rising (United Nations 1992; Australian Academy of Science 2021; Pachauri & Meyer 2018; Masson-Delmotte et al 2021).

Climate change is the most significant health crisis facing the nursing profession (International Council of Nurses 2018). Climate change inaction has created irreversible human health and welfare symptomology (Watts, Neil Adger & Agnolucci 2018). Globally the predicted death rate from climate change is expected to be up to 250,000 deaths per annum between 2030 and 2050 (World Health Organization 2017).

Climate change related incidents and natural disasters occurring at unprecedented frequencies directly affect health. The indirect health effects of climate change include poorer water quality, increased air pollution, arable land changes, and reduced biodiversity which may lead to food insecurity (World Health Organization 2017; Pachauri

et al 2018). Climate change health issues intersect with social factors such as age, gender, health status, socioeconomic status, social capital, public health infrastructure, mobility and geopolitical conflict (Pachauri et al). Combined, these climate and social determinants of health lead to poorer health and wellbeing such as unemployment, mental illness, increased food, water and vector borne infections, cardiorespiratory diseases and undernutrition (Pachauri et al; International Council of Nurses 2018; World Health Organization 2017).

Developing nations and high-risk populations such as young children, older people, women, people in poverty, people with comorbidities and Indigenous people are predicted to be most affected (Pachauri et al 2018). ACN believes climate change solutions also create economic opportunities to fix systemic gendered inequities as part of the process. The Gender Action Plan agreement at the 25th United Nations Climate Change (2021) argues the time for gender responsive climate action is now; and that taking the gendered dimension of climate change into account in policy development is essential (Gender Action Plan 2021).

KEY ISSUES

“In unstable places, the presence of nurses makes a difference. Imagine the possibilities if the scope of nursing worldwide was expanded to include actions dealing with climate change” (Butterfield, Leffers & Vasquez 2021).

Despite unequivocal evidence for climate change, political and bureaucratic emissions reduction intransigence remains a global issue, especially in Australia. As climate impacts health, the community is increasingly turning to health care professionals for leadership to deal with critical gaps in climate science, policy, and advocacy (Watts, Amann, Arnell, Ayeb-Karissson, Beagley, Belesova, Boykoff, Byass, Cai, Campbell-Lendrum, Capstick, Chambers, Coleman, Dalin, Daly, Dasandi, Dasgupta, Davies, Di Napoli, Dominguez-Salas & Costello 2021). Research shows that nurses, as one of the most trusted professions, are primed to be climate change champions, role models and trusted bearers of the moral story of climate change (Climate and Health Alliance 2021; Butterfield et al 2021).

POSITION STATEMENT Ethical leadership in emissions reduction

Nurses have ethical imperatives to lead the development of equitable climate change and energy efficiency solutions for their patients, peers, community and policymakers (ACN 2020; ICN 2018). Nursing leadership, supporting the social determinants of health, requires the nurse to be educated on climate change, take personal and professional action with other health professionals to reduce emissions in everyday practice and advocate for policy changes.

Ethical leadership influences people through ethical principles, values and beliefs that are the 'right behaviour' to create a moral climate for organisational effectiveness (Seidman 2010; Mendonca & Kanungo 2019). 'Leapfrogging' nurses into leadership roles, has been shown to accelerate emissions reduction change (WHO 2017; Butterfield et al 2021; Watts et al 2021). Most early gains in health care emissions reduction have been achieved through the introduction of nurse-led sustainable practices. Nursing leadership has been instrumental in advancing the work of the *Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education* and the *Climate and Health Alliance* (Watts et al 2021; IntraHealth International 2019).

Patient care generates considerable waste, energy and water consumption, agriculture and food use, chemicals, and transportation emissions (Hoban, Haddock & Woollcock 2021). Up to eight percent of developing nations' carbon footprint is generated through the provision of health care (Chung & Meltzer 2009; Sustainable Development Unit 2016). Nurses are directly in control of these valuable resources and employing 'environmental stewardship' is fundamental to nursing based ethical leadership in emissions reduction (Schenk 2019). Successful implementation of these strategies requires executive nurse leadership to build environmental stewardship capability and capacity in the nursing workforce.

Nurses must lead the development of climate protective nursing and health workforce strategies to ensure continuity of care workforces. Climate change will exacerbate health workforce shortages, particularly in rural, remote and vulnerable communities (Hoban et al 2021). Recent research shows that up to one third of the medical workforce in the Northern Territory are considering leaving the profession due to the impact of climate change (Pendrey, Quilty, Gruen, Weeramanthri & Lucas 2021). International demand for well trained and experienced nurses will increase as the climate related disease and non-communicable disease burden increases (ICN 2018). This will require innovative use of data and nursing research to drive evidence-based emission reduction approaches to mitigate these workforce and systemic pressures.

Comprehensive and standardised data collection systems are necessary to identify climate related costs and outcomes to subsequently inform the case for the health system to reduce the carbon footprint, engage staff, ensure organisational accountability and track improvement (Schenk 2019). Multiple partnerships must be established between nurse researchers, climate researchers,

health services and sectors such as urban design, energy, water, transport and agriculture to develop cybersafe data driven solutions (Schenk 2019). Nurses have extensive experience in health informatics, scholarship and research that is vital to lead this multifaceted inter-industry approach to emissions reduction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That ACN:

- Endorse the International Council of Nurses position statement on nurses, climate change and health
- Advocate on behalf of its membership to circulate, socialise and implement ACN Emissions Reduction Charter (2020) and Guiding Principles (2021)
- Promote nurses as vital stakeholders in driving sustainable development across the health care sector through ethical leadership
- Petition the Australian Government to deliver net-zero carbon emissions by the year 2040
- Lobby the Australian Government to develop and implement the *Climate and Health Alliance's Framework for A National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia*.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ACN would like to acknowledge the contributions of the Emissions Reduction Policy Chapter in developing this position statement:

- Dr Frances Peart FACN – Chair
- Dr Aletha Ward MACN – Deputy Chair
- Mr Mark Holmes MACN – Policy Fellow
- Mr Philip Peter FACN
- Professor Samantha Keogh MACN
- Ms Catelyn Richards MACN
- Ms Diane Heart MACN
- Professor Odette Best FACN
- Ms Amanda Singleton MACN

ACN would also like to acknowledge:

- Adjunct Professor Kylie Ward FACN – ACN CEO
- Dr Carolyn Stapleton FACN – ACN Director of Policy and Advocacy
- Mr Jay Zanesco – ACN Policy Officer



POSITION STATEMENT Ethical leadership in emissions reduction

REFERENCES

Australian Academy of Science (2021). What is Climate Change? *Australian Academy of Science*. Retrieved from: <https://www.science.org.au/learning/general-audience/science-climate-change/1-what-is-climate-change>

Australian College of Nursing (2020). Emissions reduction charter. *Australian College of Nursing*. Retrieved from: <https://www.acn.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/emissions-reduction-charter.pdf>

Butterfield, P., Leffers, J., & Vásquez, MD. (2021). 'Nursing's pivotal role in global climate action.' *The British Medical Journal*, 373(1049). <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n1049>

Chung, J.W., & Meltzer, D.O. (2009). 'Estimate of the carbon footprint of the US health care sector', *Journal of the American Medical Association* 302(18), 1970-2.

Climate and Health Alliance (2021). Real, urgent and now: Communicating the health impacts of climate change. *Climate and Health Alliance*. Retrieved from: <https://www.caha.org.au/run>

Gender Action Plan (2021). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. United Nations. Retrieved from: <https://unfccc.int/topics/gender/workstreams/the-gender-action-plan>

Hoban, E., Haddock, R., & Woolcock, K. (2021). Transforming the health system for sustainability: Environmental leadership through a value-based health care strategy. *Deeble Institute for Health Research Policy*, Canberra.

International Council of Nurses (2018). Nurses, climate change and health. *International Council of Nurses*. Retrieved from: <https://www.icn.ch/sites/default/files/inline-files/ICN%20PS%20Nurses%252c%20climate%20change%20and%20health%20FINAL%20.pdf>

IntraHealth International (2019). Investing in the power of nurse leadership: what will it take? *IntraHealth International*. Retrieved from: <https://www.intrahealth.org/sites/ihweb/files/attachment-files/investing-nurse-leadershipreport.pdf>

Masson-Delmotte, V., Zhai, P., Pirani, A., Connors, S.L., Péan, C., Berger, S., Caud, N., Chen, Y., Goldfarb, L., Gomis, M.I., Huang, M., Leitzell, K., Lonnoy, E., Matthews, J.B.R., Maycock, T.K., Waterfield, T., Yelekçi, O., Yu, R., & Zhou, B. (eds.) (2021). Summary for Policymakers. In: *Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis. Contribution of Working Group I to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Mendonca, M., & Kanungo, R. (2019). Ethical leadership: Work and organizational psychology, *Open University Press*, New York.

Pachauri, R.K., & Meyer, L.A. (2018). Climate change 2014: Synthesis report. Contribution of Working Groups, I, II, III to the Fifth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Retrieved from: <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/syr/>

Pendrey, C.G., Quilty, S., Gruen, R.L., Weeramanthri, T., & Lucas, R.M. (2021). 'Is climate change exacerbating health-care workforce shortages for underserved populations?' *The Lancet: Planetary Health*, 5(4), 183-4.

Schenk E. C. (2019). 'Environmental stewardship in nursing: Introducing the "WE ACT – PLEASE" Framework. *Creative Nursing*, 25(3), 222–231. <https://doi.org/10.1891/1078-4535.25.3.222>

Seidman, D. (2010). Ethical leadership: An operating manual. Bloomberg. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2010-12-17/ethical-leadership-an-operating-manual>

Sustainable Development Unit (2016). Carbon footprint update for NHS in England. *Sustainable Development Unit, National Health Service*. <https://www.sduhealth.org.uk/policy-strategy/reporting/nhs-carbon-footprint.aspx>

United Nations (1992). United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). *United Nations*. https://unfccc.int/files/essential_background/background_publications_htmlpdf/application/pdf/conveng.pdf

Watts, N., Amann, M., Arnell, N., Ayeb-Karlsson, S., Beagley, J., Belesova, K., Boykoff, M., Byass, P., Cai, W., Campbell-Lendrum, D., Capstick, S., Chambers, J., Coleman, S., Dalin, C., Daly, M., Dasandi, N., Dasgupta, S., Davies, M., Di Napoli, C., Dominguez-Salas, P., & Costello, A. (2021). 'The 2020 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: Responding to converging crises.' *The Lancet*, 397(10269), 129-170. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(20\)32290-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32290-X)

Watts, N., Neil Adger, W., & Agnolucci, P. (2018). 'Health and climate change: Policy responses to protect public health'. *The Lancet*, 386, 1861-914.

World Health Organisation (2017). 'Climate Change and health: Fact sheet. *World Health Organisation*. Retrieved from: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en>

CITATION: Australian College of Nursing (ACN). 2021, 'Ethical leadership in emissions reduction – Position Statement', ACN, Canberra. © ACN 2021

ISBN Print: 978-1-922720-08-5

ISBN Electronic: 978-1-922720-07-8

