



Reimagining the role of nursing in emissions reduction

Developed December 2021

KEY STATEMENT

The Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is committed to ensuring nurses – as the largest health workforce and leading patient advocates – are supported to reduce waste and emissions in the health care sector, and to confidently communicate the health consequences of climate change. Emerging innovations must now be championed through the inclusion of climate justice within existing and future undergraduate nursing degrees and investment in nurse-led, grassroots emissions reduction actions and projects.

KEY ISSUES

Nurses are at the forefront of patient care, meaning that nursing leadership is needed to support policy and practice aimed at reducing health care waste and related emissions. Nurses are well-placed to take advantage of opportunities to reduce emissions through nurse-led research, changes to bedside practice and organisational policy reforms.

As the largest workforce within the health sector, the nursing profession must advocate for their communities in calling for climate justice and action. Nurses are uniquely positioned to lead sustainable changes in health care as they have a degree of responsibility in health care systems; are part of the multidisciplinary team (Butterfield et al., 2021); exhibit a strong desire to care (Durkin et al., 2018); have a duty and opportunity in leadership roles to adapt practice (Kangasniemi et al., 2014; Butterfield et al., 2021) and most importantly, they have the opportunity to implement changes (Cashin et al., 2017) at the forefront of service provision (Munoz, 2012).

The average health care worker contributes approximately 13kg of waste per day through the overuse of non-sustainable resources (Cook et al., 2019). Types of waste in health care can be medical waste from equipment packaging, biomedical waste from treatments or general waste such as bottled water and coffee cups. Health care wastage ultimately ends up in landfill or incinerated, releasing harmful toxins that impact the environment and health (Doylo et al., 2019).

Undergraduate nursing education must address the impacts of climate change on the social determinants of health to ensure nurses are empowered to lead emissions reduction. ACN calls for emissions reduction and climate change education to be incorporated within the current curriculum, with future-focused and relevant four-year nursing undergraduate degrees introduced long-term. Case studies within the curriculum should address the evolving impacts of climate and how to create socially and environmentally responsive models of care. Further, nurses must be empowered through educational opportunities to confidently display and build skills in influence and leadership and engage in scientific climate change communication.

To tangibly encourage and empower nurse leaders working within both the public, private and non-profit health sectors, ACN calls on the Federal Government to provide funding for an innovative seeding grant targeting emissions reduction efforts. The grant will provide funds for nurse-led projects and innovations that aim to reduce waste and emissions in the workplace. The three-year pilot programme will establish three levels of funding designed to target a range of geographic and social sectors in addition to workplace waste and emissions points. Through regular evaluation of data, ACN can create a national plan and best practice guide for reducing waste and emissions within Australia's health care system.

Nurses have not yet reached their full potential in influencing climate action and justice, however through education, influencing policy direction and undertaking research, the nursing profession can lead the health care sector to reduce emissions and waste. This is vital to both the health care industry and the communities nurses care for.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ACN calls for:

- an immediate national strategy to deliver nursing education that includes and encourages leadership principles and nurse-led innovation. In the long-term, the importance of climate change in the health and aged care systems should be incorporated into a four-year undergraduate nursing degree to ensure the curriculum is relevant and future-focused
- the Federal Government fund an innovative grants programme, administered by ACN. The national emissions and waste reduction grant will provide seed capital to develop and enable nurse-led emissions reduction in health and aged care. Funding will support grassroots ideas, projects and pilots that will contribute to positive climate action.

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CITATION:

Australian College of Nursing (ACN), 2022. 'Position Statement: Reimagining the role of nursing in emissions reduction' - A Position Statement by ACN, ACN, Canberra.
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ISBN print 978-1-922720-18-4

ISBN digital online 978-1-922720-17-7