



LESLEY DIXON MIDWIFERY ADVISOR

keeping up the pressure to enable change

In recent months, severe flooding has affected various regions of New Zealand, headlining the news. Personal stories of loss, fear and economic hardship have accompanied each headline and although flood waters may have receded, the distress for whānau is ongoing, taking much longer to overcome.

There is little doubt our climate is changing and if current trends continue, the impacts will be far-reaching, affecting us all. This makes for a depressing future, with the magnitude of the issue requiring a concerted international effort, but also individual change and support. For most of us, knowing what to do is challenging personally, professionally and politically. This article explores the changes currently being implemented both politically and within the health sector, to reduce carbon emissions.

THE GLOBAL PICTURE

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Working Group has delivered the third part of the Sixth Assessment Report to world governments. The report examines climate change impacts, adaptation and vulnerability.

The report explains that we are in a critical time period if we are to limit warming, with the window of opportunity rapidly closing. The picture is grim. Without concerted global action, emissions could potentially rise and lead to a median warming of 3.2°C by the year 2100. It is expected that flooding, heat waves, extreme weather and drought will become more frequent and severe, and the impact on

"We are at a crossroads. The decisions we make now can secure a liveable future. We have the tools and know-how required to limit warming" - IPCC Chair Hoesung Lee

vulnerable populations more pronounced. For children born now, the likelihood that they will be exposed to deadly heat stress is projected to increase from today's 30% to 48-76% by the end of the century (depending on future warming levels and location). Climate change will affect every part of our lives including the economy, the environment, where we live and how we work.

THERE IS HOPE: WE HAVE THE SOLUTIONS

The good news is that the impact of climate change can be reduced to within limits, if humans and nature adapt to the changing conditions. This involves reducing greenhouse emissions, protecting and conserving ecosystems and taking action to change the way we live our lives.

THE FIRST STEP: REDUCING GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS

Greenhouse gas emissions can be reduced through a combination of government policy, infrastructural change and technological improvements, along with individual lifestyle and behavioural adaptations. Solutions involve clean energy generation, circular economies, healthy diets from sustainable farming, appropriate urban planning and transport, universal health coverage and social protection, training and education, as well as water and energy access for everyone, to help reduce poverty.

"We now know that a healthy planet is fundamental to secure a liveable future for people on Earth and that's why we say that the needs of climate, nature and local communities have to be considered together and prioritized in decision making and planning - every day and in every region of our world" (IPCC sixth assessment report).



Many countries are adopting a range of policies and laws to enhance energy efficiency, reduce rates of deforestation and accelerate the deployment of renewable energy. However, limiting global warming will require major transitions in the energy sector (from coal and oil to renewable energy sources) as well as improved energy efficiency, and use of alternative fuels (such as hydrogen).

"To successfully secure our own future and the future of the coming generations, climate risks must be factored into each decision and planning. We have the knowledge and the tools. Now it is our choice to make" (IPPC sixth assessment report).

We need our governments to make transformational change if we, and our children, are to have a sustainable future.

POLITICAL PRESSURE

In 2018, *Ora Taiao*, the NZ Climate and Health Council (of which the College is a member) called for "a rapid whole of society approach to a net-zero GHG-emitting nation, which is based in Te Tiriti o Waitangi and designed to make the most of opportunities for health and creating a fairer society". *Ora Taiao* also outlined the need for robust interim targets and emissions budgets, in order to monitor progress. In May, the government published its first emissions budget, setting the pathway for lowering emissions. An emissions budget identifies the total quantity of emissions allowed over a five year period. These budgets will act as stepping stones to keep Aotearoa on track to meet its long-term targets (Box 1).

Box 1. Political solutions

Every political party needs to recognise the importance of climate change and ensure ongoing and concerted action to reduce carbon emissions.

These involve:

- Clean energy generation (renewables)
- Supporting circular economies (using regenerative industrial processes and economic activities)
- Sustainable farming whilst reducing emissions
- Improved urban planning – to reduce travel
- Increased public transport – to reduce reliance on cars.

Many people consider that the government is not acting quickly enough, whilst others are concerned some sectors are being targeted more than others. There are always differences of opinion within society, although it is now clear - reducing emissions is urgent and non-negotiable. Climate change requires all political parties to work together and respond decisively.

A CALL TO ACTION FOR HEALTH

On World Health Day (7 April) *Ora Taiao* published a letter to the Health Minister Hon Andrew Little asking for the healthcare system to be made climate-ready and climate-friendly as part of the health reforms. They provided a series of critical actions needed within the health sector (Box 2), for inclusion within the health care reforms. The letter was endorsed by 11 organisations representing midwives, nurses, doctors and other health professionals. The College was one of the signatories on this letter calling for a healthy climate response.

SUPPORT FOR DISTRICT HEALTH BOARD (DHB) SUSTAINABILITY

In 2019, the Ministry released a five-step guide to sustainability for the health sector, identifying the need to take an active role in sustainability, starting with organisational commitment and the whole hierarchy of the organisation being aware and supportive of the concept.

The next step measures progress, including the need to identify the organisation’s greenhouse gasses using the accepted international standard for carbon accounting. Equity remains a vital focus within health and the guide recommends that this remain a priority because climate change disproportionately affects disadvantaged populations.

Box 2. Solutions for the health system

Identified by *Ora Taiao*, the *NZ Climate and Health Council* as critical actions:

- Establish a dedicated sustainability unit, which will oversee decarbonisation within the sector and be supported by practising health professionals.
- Increase intersectionality between the health sector and other public agencies in order to ensure that a healthy climate response becomes a central factor for decision making in transport, housing, welfare, food systems, and other core government work.
- Mandate that adequate funding, resourcing and agency is given to the Māori Health Authority so that it can be a central player in our health sector’s response to climate change. Too often lip-service is paid to the need to have te ao Māori at the heart of our climate response; this is an opportunity to actually achieve that.
- Effectively incorporate primary care into the wider health sector climate response.
- Outline the immediate climate gains that will be achieved in the initial two-year Health Plan. For example: ongoing repurposing of coal boilers; a ban on new gas boilers; all medicine and equipment procurement decisions to have greenhouse gas emissions as a key decision factor; an immediate stop on international business-class flights for staff; plant-based hospital catering; and an urgent switch from metered-dose to dry powder asthma inhalers.

A further step is raising awareness with education campaigns to develop a sustainability culture within the organisation. The final step is to build networks with other organisations with similar goals to share information and initiatives that may be helpful (Fig.1).

OUR DHBS ARE STEPPING UP AND SOME ARE LEADING THE WAY

Over the last few years, many DHBs have been working to reduce their emissions, with others starting more recently. Many have joined the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network (GGHH). This is an international network of hospitals, facilities and health organisations who have all agreed to work towards reducing their environmental footprint. They identify 10 goals for systems to consider (Box 3).

In 2021 GGHH published a list of Health Care Climate Champions who are “stepping up in transforming to a sustainable climate smart health sector by setting ambitious targets to mitigate their emissions”.

The list includes:

Counties Manukau Health Board

Counties Manukau have been measuring their carbon emissions for the past 10 years and were the winner of the Toitū Brighter

Box 3. 10 goals for Global Green and Healthy Hospitals

1. Leadership – prioritise environmental health
2. Chemicals – substitute harmful chemicals with safer alternatives
3. Waste – reduce, treat and safely dispose of health care waste
4. Energy – implement energy efficiency and clean renewable energy generation
5. Water – reduce hospital water consumption and supply portable water
6. Transportation – improve transportation strategies for patients and staff
7. Food – purchase and serve sustainably grown healthy food
8. Pharmaceuticals – safely manage and dispose of pharmaceuticals
9. Buildings – support green and healthy hospital design and construction
10. Purchasing – buy safer and more sustainable products and materials.



New Zealanders have been struggling in recent months with rising flood waters

Future Award for Climate Action (large organisation). They have reduced carbon emissions by 42% since 2012 (certified by Toitū).

Auckland District Health Board

Auckland DHB have reduced carbon emissions by 28% since 2015 and were also a finalist for the Toitū Brighter Future Award for Climate Action (large organisation).

Northland District Health Board

Northland DHB have reduced their carbon emissions by 21% since 2015 although emissions increased by 4% last year (2021). They remain committed to sustainability with a target to halve their emissions by 2030.

On 2 December, 2020 central government issued a directive that all public sector organisations will be carbon neutral from 2025. This means that all DHBs will need to work urgently to reduce emissions further. Individual DHB websites were searched for information on their sustainability planning (Table 1) with many just beginning this work, whilst others have set out their plans on reducing emissions.

CONCLUSION

There is little argument that climate change is having a detrimental effect on our weather and health. Action is urgently required, but many of us feel powerless when faced with the huge amount of work to make the major changes that are necessary. It is reassuring to see that the government is leading change and that DHBs are identifying their carbon emissions and looking at steps to reduce them. Midwives can be part of the solution by holding their DHBs to account for their actions and considering how they can contribute by raising awareness of the issues and initiatives in their workplaces.

As a member of *Ora Taiao*, the College is committed to being part of the solution, with the 2021 ratification of the *Climate change, midwifery and environmental sustainability* consensus statement and the progressive development of other resources for midwives and families on a variety of subjects aimed at helping to support systemic and individual change. Reducing emissions and becoming emission-free is the future goal; one which will require all of us working together to achieve. ■

Figure 1. Actions for successful sustainability programmes (MOH, 2019)

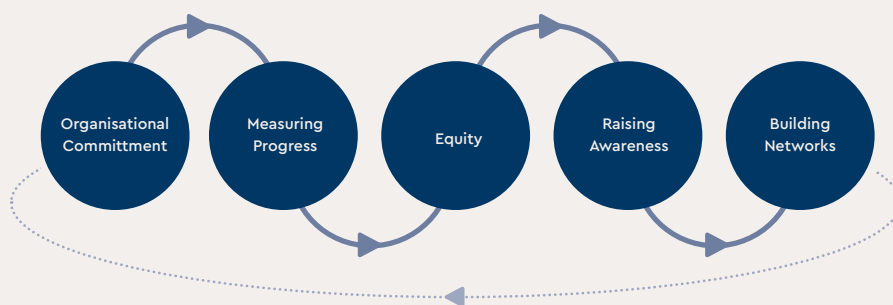


Table 1. DHB commitment to carbon reduction*

	DHB	Progress on carbon reduction
North Island	Auckland	28% reduction since 2015
	Bay of Plenty	17% reduction on the baseline year
	Capital and Coast	In second year of reporting with Toitū
	Counties Manukau	42% reduction since 2012
	Hawkes Bay	Registered with Toitū and will set targets and initiatives in place to reduce carbon footprint.
	Hutt Valley	No information on website
	Lakes District	No information on website
	Mid Central	No information on website
	Northland	21% reduction since 2016
	Tairāwhiti	No information on website
	Taranaki	Registered with Toitū and will set targets and initiatives to reduce carbon footprint.
	Waikato	No information on website
	Wairarapa	No information on website
Waitematā	Waitakere Hospital and North Shore Hospital are Toitū enviromark Gold certified.	
South Island	Canterbury	Have set up the Transalpine Environmental Sustainability Group and starting to reduce emissions. Working on other initiatives to support sustainability.
	Nelson Marlborough	No information on website
	South Canterbury	Business case for the maternity unit and energy change (away from coal) awaiting sign-off from Minister.
	Southern	No information on website
	West Coast	As per Canterbury

*This information has been identified by visiting individual DHB websites. Plans for sustainability may have been made, but not shared, on public facing websites. Please ask your local DHB to find out what they are doing.