



## EFN Policy Statement on the Nurses' Contribution to Tackle Climate Change

EFN, the European Federation of Nurses Associations, representing 3 million EU nurses, believes that nurses' duty of care not only includes the future of our individual patients, but also that of communities locally, nationally and globally. Therefore, EFN acknowledges the direct attribute of human activity to climate change, and the urgent threat climate change poses to global health.

### The role of Nurses

Nurses have four fundamental responsibilities: to promote health, to prevent illness, to restore health and to alleviate suffering (ICN, 2002). According to the ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses, it is their duty to advocate for equity and social justice in resource allocation, access to health care and other social and economic services (ICN, 2012).

Nurses are highly trusted professionals, and their education enables them to understand science and to communicate findings to the population. Nurses have a long tradition and are important experts in informing the public about diseases and promoting health. It is evident that nurses and nurses' organisations can take on an important role as change agents in a variety of activities concerning the climate crises.

### Climate and health

*"Our planet is on fire. Sea levels are rising, coral reefs are dying, forests are burning. We are increasingly seeing the life-threatening impact of climate change on health, through air pollution, storm surges, heatwaves, risks to food security and more. Climate action and public health are intertwined. Climate change is the defining issue of our time and now is the last window of opportunity to do something about"* (The Global Climate & Health Alliance, 23.9.2019).

The burning of fossil energy (oil, gas, petrol) is the main reason, why global temperatures are raising significantly. This has many negative effects on people's health. Deaths, injuries and displacement, malnutrition, and the spread of water-food-and vector borne diseases follow these climate impacts. Healthcare itself is a major contributor to climate change' (e.g. the CO<sub>2</sub> emissions of hospitals). Extreme heat is reducing our capacity to perform. The capacity to regulate temperatures decreases if we do not react. This leads to human suffering and people dying. It is expected that in bigger cities the heat will rise to 6 degrees in the coming years.

- Agricultural production is already decreasing with the consequence that the food production will be less, and a growing proportion of the world population will suffer from malnutrition with all its negative consequences for peoples – especially

children's – health and development. In the most affected regions, an increasing number of people will be dying.

- Infectious diseases (Dengue, Zika, Malaria) will come to Europe.
- There will be Hurricanes not just in Asia or the Americas.
- Burning Forests are polluting the air and increasing the temperatures.
- Sea levels rising everywhere (Holland – Pacific Islands) with the consequences of people's loss of livelihoods.

### **Action to be taken**

There is a great need for political and individual action on climate change. Strategies and activities can take many forms. Many actions aim to build social and political support to limit, and subsequently reduce, the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere with the goal of mitigating climate change. Other actions seek to address the ethical and moral aspects of climate justice, especially with regard to the anticipated unequal impacts of climate change adaptation.

*« The European Commission sets out a European Green Deal for the European Union (EU) and its citizens. It resets the Commission's commitment to tackling climate and environmental-related challenges that is this generation's defining task. The European Green Deal is a response to these challenges. It is a new growth strategy that aims to transform the EU into a fair and prosperous society, with a modern, resource-efficient and competitive economy where there are no net emissions of greenhouse gases in 2050 and where economic growth is decoupled from resource use. It also aims to protect, conserve and enhance the EU's natural capital, and protect the health and well-being of citizens from environment-related risks and impacts » (European Commission, 2019)*

### **The contribution of nurses and nurses' organisations**

It is our last chance before climate-induced irreversible damage to people and nature occurs. For nurses and their organisations there are different levels to act and to work for change by advocating towards key stakeholders, including governments and to take action in climate change mitigation and adaptation: the level where nurses can influence policy; the public awareness level; the level of the health system; the level of our personnel lives.

### **The EFN members call on the Commission, the European Parliament and National Governments (Council of the European Union) to:**

- Prioritise the development of policies and agreements that favour climate solutions and protect public health and global equity.
- Demonstrate leadership in setting an agenda to limit warming to 1.5°C and in fulfilling countries' emissions deduction commitments under the Paris Agreement.
- Include ministries of health and health civil society, especially nurses' associations and organisations, in EU and national decision making to ensure climate ambition and strategies are designed to maximally protect health and improve global equity.

- Commit appropriate levels of funding to finance climate and health research, resilience, adaptation and mitigation, and to enable health sector involvement in climate decision-making and implementation.
- Increase prevention and health promotion activities and incorporate health literacy in citizens' empowerment strategies. Prevention is key in personalised healthcare, in contributing to populations' health, and implies the adoption of citizen-centric approaches. Nurses are uniquely placed to act as a health coach and to help to promote individual emission reduction and healthy lifestyles.
- To invest in the education of the nursing workforce, as part of Lifelong Learning programmes, to facilitate nurses roles as change agents and their further development of knowledge, skills and competences in the field of climate change and mitigation of negative effects of growing temperatures.

**On the basis of the ICN Position Statement – Nurses, climate change and health (2018), EFN encourages national nurses' associations (NNAs), in collaboration with their respective government, to:**

- Work to enable nursing leadership and nurses to support health care organisations to contribute to climate change mitigation through implementation of environmental policies and sustainable practices.
- Engage in national and multisectoral measures to mitigate the impact of climate change on the population with a focus on vulnerable groups and those more exposed to disease and injury.
- Be involved in developing national action plans and policies for mitigation, adaptation, and resilience strategies as well as contribute to environmental health and justice policymaking.
- Raise awareness of the health implications of climate change and how to assess and address climate change risks to health by developing policy documents on the subject.
- Embed the concept of sustainability in nursing practice as well as climate change-related knowledge into nursing curricula and in post-registration continuing education.
- Collaborate with other health professional organisations, intergovernmental organisations, environmental and health organisations and other civil society groups when developing health-adaptation policies and programmes.
- Engage with media to promote public awareness of the harmful effects of climate change on health and to promote mitigation strategies.
- Support the introduction of incentives for nurses to incorporate environmentally responsible health practices into their interventions.

**EFN and ICN call on individual nurses in their role as clinicians, educators, researchers, policy influencers, or executives, to:**

- Advocate for policies that promote the reduction of healthcare waste and ensure correct waste management by introducing efficient recycling systems at hospitals, as

nurses are administering drugs daily, hence resulting in unnecessary amounts of packaging wasted.

- Actively engage in environmental health committees and policymaking that focus on the safety and protection of health professionals and the management and regulation of the healthcare environment.
- At healthcare settings, foster a move from the current heavy use of energy and non-renewable resources towards clean energy and sustainable resources. This could be done without sacrificing the quality of care.
- Better schedule nurses' working distances, particularly of those working at community or home settings, to reduce transportation by road to the bare minimum.
- Empower individuals, families and communities to make healthy lifestyle choices and change own practices (i.e. active transportation, use green energy, dietary changes) to decrease the contribution to GHGs.

### Related Bibliography

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*EFN Policy Statement on the Nurses Contribution to Tackle Climate Change – October 2020*

