

NHS Sustainability – A Wicked Problem of Priorities

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In light of the 6th climate change assessment report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), it is clear that the climatic crisis is 'unequivocally' being caused by human activity.¹ The report further emphasised how humanity will not meet Paris Agreement targets (1.5-2 degrees of warming) unless 'deep reductions in greenhouse gases emissions' are made. There is also strong evidence to suggest that excessive human-produced waste can hinder the ability of the environment to remove sufficient carbon dioxide, which is vital to suppress a greenhouse effect.²

Climate change is claimed to be the greatest threat to human health in history concerning the increasingly frequent extreme weather events, droughts, and fires, rising seas, as well as the secondary and tertiary human health effects which arise as a consequence of these events.³ The World Health Organisation estimates that from 2030, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250,000 additional deaths per year, costing USD 2-4 billion/year.⁴ It is, therefore, imperative for large organisations to monitor and consider their sustainability when entering this new era of environmental consciousness. All establishments are responsible for becoming conscious of current wicked problems; however, organisations within the health sector have an increased responsibility to uphold these values and beliefs.

Although the National Health Service (NHS) does not contribute enough waste and pollution to have endangering effects on the earth system, it combines with many other organisations and sectors with a similar effect on the environment, making the impact dangerous. Being the largest employer in Europe⁵, the NHS can influence millions of individuals and reduce high waste output. This combination of influence and pollution reduction will make a significant step towards environmental sustainability in the United Kingdom (UK).

Despite having little exposure to NHS planning and procedure, as an environmental impact student, it is evident to understand the large volume of waste produced by the organisation and procedures which contribute to this further. Issues of resource management, sanitisation technology and excessive energy use appear to underpin the NHS' pollution issues. Designed and implemented at a time of little environmental knowledge and consequential impacts of environmental degradation, one can accept why such procedures and plans were synthesised with healthcare as a central objective with little consideration for other factors such as the environment.

Although the NHS' waste output of 600,000 tonnes per annum⁶ is far from sustainable, the organisation is becoming increasingly aware of the consequences of producing such large quantities of waste on corporate responsibility, broader ecosystem functionality and thus human health. Initiatives such as the Greener NHS⁷ or the Sustainable Development Plan carve the NHS into a more sustainable direction with several emerging goals and objectives; The NHS' Sustainable Development Plan provides a generic set of goals that align with the United Nation's sustainable development goals with few temporal scales and specific measures. On the other hand, the Greener NHS initiative details more specific measures for reducing the NHS' carbon footprint. Despite the Greener NHS initiative having a more detailed explanation of more

ambitious measurements than the Sustainable Development Plans, the current net-zero target by 2040 is too late when acknowledging recent IPCC research. The Greener NHS also details weak emphasis on reducing clinical and domestic waste and suggests generic practices to reduce energy usages, such as turning off lights and bringing reusable bottles to work rather than plans for new legislation, procedures, and greener technology introduction.

While the NHS appears to be adequately acknowledging the need for environmental action and how the environment underpins global human health, procedures and measures do not currently seem strong enough to align with current IPCC targets. If the NHS chooses to take weak action towards becoming a more sustainable organisation, it will undermine what the organisation stands for and inevitably add strain to the service it seeks to provide. Adjusting targets and the implementation of new policy could, however, make environmental sustainability a possibility and add to the commendable and crucial service of the NHS.

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