

RCEM position statement on environmentally sustainable emergency healthcare

Executive Summary

The climate emergency is an existential threat and a healthcare crisis. Rising global temperatures are negatively impacting the health of our patients, and we know that healthcare itself is responsible for 4% ^[1] of the carbon footprint of the UK.

But we **can** make a difference. As we adapt to the challenges of providing healthcare in the midst of climate-related disruptions, we can reduce the environmental impact of our work and advocate for sustainable change to the wider healthcare system.

All nations of the UK have established targets to transition to net-zero healthcare over the next 15-20 years. In England those targets are enshrined in the Health and Care Act (2022), with the responsibility for achieving these targets lying with Integrated Care Boards.

These targets provide both a challenge and opportunity. The challenge is working out what low carbon emergency care is and implementing this in an overstretched emergency healthcare system. And an opportunity in recognising that the resources and funding allocated to achieving carbon neutral targets allow us to innovate and make our practice more environmentally sustainable - thereby making it more timely, efficient, equitable and patient-centred, tackling both the emergency care crisis in and the climate and ecological crisis.

With this in mind, we recommend:

- 1. Emergency Medicine staff should understand and work to reduce their impact on the environment, including measuring carbon emissions where possible.**
- 2. Emergency Department leadership teams are encouraged to engage with the environmental agenda, and include issues aligned with this agenda as part of their core business. Ideally Emergency Departments will have a 'Green ED' group or similar, along with a nominated environmental sustainability lead.**
- 3. Emergency Medicine staff can contribute towards low carbon healthcare that is efficient, timely and optimises resource use, ensuring that the right patient gets the right care at the right time.**
- 4. Emergency care professionals have a role to play in achieving the health benefits of swift societal decarbonisation and promoting public health; the most environmentally sustainable healthcare is healthcare that is no longer needed.**

5. Research funding must be identified to evaluate and develop the evidence base for best practice in reducing carbon in healthcare.

Background: The compounding crises of emergency care and the environment

Globally, emergency healthcare systems are having to deal with the health consequences of extreme weather events such as heatwaves, flooding and severe storms. During the summer of 2022, we treated patients suffering the effects of the heatwaves in the UK.

The degradation of our living environment caused by the release of pollution and 'greenhouse gases' created by our society, means we are living through a climate emergency, described by The Lancet as the greatest threat to human health of the 21st Century [\[2\]](#).

At the same time, we are faced with rising demand on our healthcare systems around the world. It is within these two compounding crises that we set out our vision for sustainable emergency healthcare:

- High quality emergency healthcare should be patient-centred, safe, timely and clinically effective. High quality care should also be accessible and address inequalities in health. By creating more efficient patient pathways, and by minimising unnecessary investigations and interventions, we can achieve these aims and reduce patient harm, maximise our resources, improve patient flow, and improve the environmental sustainability of our work.
- Emergency healthcare can also support system-wide functioning, by ensuring patients are directed to appropriate care settings, intervening early in the disease-course and focusing on preventing ill-health in the first place.
- It is important to understand where the carbon intensity lies in our healthcare systems so we can determine how to reduce it as much as possible while maintaining excellent patient care.

Our recommendations detail how the environmental sustainability of emergency medicine can be improved:

- **Emergency Departments should understand and work to reduce their impact on the environment, including measuring carbon emissions where possible.**

As well as undertaking carbon foot printing of the services that we provide, we must also develop the tools to measure and model the environmental impacts of care to better identify problem areas. This will require working in partnership with manufacturers and suppliers of healthcare consumables, therapeutics and technologies. We must continue to develop quality and service improvement skills within our workforce, introducing the concepts enshrined in 'green' or sustainable Quality Improvement to develop and implement the changes we need. We must work closely with partners across the Integrated Care System to maximise the efficiency of the resources available to us in the provision of urgent and emergency healthcare.

- **Emergency Department leadership teams are encouraged to engage with the environmental agenda, and include issues aligned with this agenda as part of their core**

¹ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2020/01/greener-nhs-campaign-to-tackle-climate-health-emergency/>

² <https://www.lancetcountdown.org/2022-report/>

business. Ideally Emergency Departments will have a Green ED group or similar, along with a nominated environmental sustainability lead.

Improving the sustainability of our practice will require change in how we work. From the results of pilot schemes, we know the most successful change comes when there is support from senior leadership. In order to meet the net zero targets for healthcare, emergency departments will need to develop competence in sustainable quality improvement and carbon foot printing. Embedding environmental sustainability into the core responsibilities of senior leadership will help drive the cultural and systems change that we need to achieve transition to net zero emergency healthcare.

- **Emergency Departments can contribute towards low carbon healthcare that is efficient, timely and optimises resource use, ensuring that the right patient gets the right care at the right time.**

Working to reduce the impact of the emergency care crisis by improving flow through the healthcare system and ensuring that the patient gets the proper care, in the right place at the right time will also improve the environmental sustainability of our practice. The Getting It Right First Time (GIRFT) programme's emergency medicine work has seen improvements to patient flow across the country; one example showed a 30% reduction in surgical admissions, whilst maintaining excellent patient care. Not only does this improve flow through the hospital, reducing harm to patients, it will also reduce the environmental impact from those admissions. The typical carbon footprint of 24 hours of admission is 37-85 KgCO₂ equivalent, depending on the intensity of admission ^[3].

- **Emergency care professionals have a role to play in achieving the health benefits of swift societal decarbonisation and promoting public health; the most environmentally sustainable healthcare is healthcare that is no longer needed.**

As emergency care professionals we interact with a wide range of people in society and can contribute to public health. For instance, we can add to our brief intervention repertoire by promoting active transport, physical activity and implementing social prescribing initiatives, helping tackle some of the biggest causes of preventable ill-health in Europe (air pollution and physical inactivity)^[4]. We can also use our trusted voices as healthcare professionals to advocate for improved public health measures, furthermore there is enormous potential to influence the social and policy landscape in support of the rapid decarbonisation, that is needed to protect health and health systems^[6].

- **Research funding must be identified to evaluate and develop the evidence base for best practice in reducing carbon in healthcare.**

There is not yet a consensus as to what a net zero health service looks like ^[7]. Developing this vision will require funded research to ensure that we can achieve net zero goals whilst maintaining excellent patient care. We can identify areas where research will inform how to make proportionate change to our practice to improve environmental sustainability whilst maintaining excellent standards of patient care.

³ <https://shcoalition.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Sustainable-Care-Pathways-Guidance-Inpatient-Bed-Day-Module-Oct-2015.pdf>

⁴ BMJ 2023;380:p378

⁵ <https://www.nature.com/articles/s43247-022-00571-x>

⁶ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(23\)00022-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(23)00022-0/fulltext)

⁷ <https://emj.bmj.com/content/38/4/315>