
Net Zero in Healthcare: Moving from Myth to Action



Decarbonisation of the healthcare sector has become urgent. Hospitals and health systems are critical in reducing the carbon footprint and embracing sustainability. However, many institutions are held back by misconceptions about the feasibility, cost, and impact of implementing climate-conscious practices. During the second Plenary Session of the World Hospital Congress (WHC) in Rio on September 11, 2024, these myths were thoroughly dismantled by experts, encouraging healthcare providers to take actionable steps toward sustainability. Chaired by Dr Toseef Din, the session brought together leaders from various regions to share strategies for moving beyond barriers and misconceptions, showing that net-zero healthcare is not only possible but essential.

Demystifying Data: A Powerful Ally in the Sustainability Journey

One of the most pervasive myths in healthcare sustainability is the belief that effective action requires perfect data. Many hospitals hesitate to act because they feel overwhelmed by the need for extensive data collection, measurement, and management of emissions. Vital Ribeiro, President of the Board of the Healthy Hospitals Project in Brazil, addressed these concerns head-on, emphasising that waiting for flawless data can lead to inaction. He highlighted that climate change is not just one of many public health challenges but the greatest threat to global health in this century. Delaying action due to data uncertainties could exacerbate the impact of climate change on healthcare systems and communities. Ribeiro encouraged hospitals to start small, using existing tools such as those from the Geneva Sustainability Centre, to begin managing emissions and making meaningful progress toward sustainability.

Cost Misconception: Climate Mitigation as a Financial Burden

A frequent concern is that climate mitigation measures are too expensive, particularly for healthcare systems in low-income or lower-middle-income regions. Dr Zeenat Sulaiman Khan, Regional CEO of the Aga Khan Development Network (AKDN) for East Africa, addressed this myth by demonstrating that sustainability can be achieved without breaking the bank. Using real-world examples, she showed how low-cost, high-impact interventions could produce significant returns on investment. By targeting clear, achievable goals and starting with small steps, healthcare organisations can progress toward net zero while enhancing operational efficiency. Carrie Owen Plietz, Regional President of Northern California at Kaiser Permanente, reinforced this by sharing her organisation's journey to carbon neutrality in 2020. Kaiser Permanente saved substantial energy costs through initiatives like the microgrid at Saint Marcus Medical Center, which now generates most of its own electricity. Plietz underscored that creative thinking around sustainability contributes to environmental goals and can lead to financial rewards. Sustainable healthcare isn't just a moral imperative; it's also a wise financial decision.

Engaging Clinicians: Leadership at the Frontlines of Care

A critical myth often hindering sustainability efforts is the belief that integrating environmental actions into healthcare will conflict with clinical priorities. Nick Watts, Director of the Centre for Sustainable Medicine at the National University of Singapore, tackled this head-on. Clinicians, he argued, often feel that sustainability initiatives would either distract from patient care or add to their already overwhelming workload. However, Watts emphasised that healthcare professionals want to work in environments that align with their ethical values, which include "doing no harm." Engaging clinicians and embedding sustainability into healthcare delivery fabric makes it possible to meet both environmental and clinical goals. Watts presented examples where sustainability interventions—such as reducing waste, improving energy efficiency, and using greener materials—led to better patient outcomes and more resilient healthcare systems. Clinicians are essential leaders in this transformation, and their involvement is vital to achieving meaningful progress in healthcare's climate journey.

The Plenary Session at the WHC 2024 clarified that the time for excuses is over. Climate action in healthcare is not a "nice to have," it's an essential step for the survival and resilience of healthcare systems globally. From debunking the myths around data to proving that climate mitigation is not only affordable but profitable, the session's speakers offered concrete examples of how healthcare institutions can begin their sustainability journeys today. Engaging clinicians and integrating environmental goals into the day-to-day operations of healthcare systems are vital to this mission. As the world faces an accelerating climate crisis, healthcare leaders must take proactive steps to align with net-zero goals. The message from the session was unmistakable: there is no longer a reason to wait—it's time to act.

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