

What is the role of the emergency nurse in environmental sustainability?

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The aim of this paper is to stimulate debate and discussion amongst emergency nurses about the future challenges we face around health's carbon footprint and the effect it has on our patient's health.

There is little doubt left amongst the scientific community about the damaging effects of global warming. The health care sector must show interest in the climate debate and its impact on human health. In England, the NHS contributed to 25% of public sector carbon emissions in 2004. These carbon emissions contribute to global warming which adversely affects the very thing we care about most; the health of our patients.

Climate change is expected to cause an increase in heat waves and other severe weather events, such as heavy rainfall, floods, hailstorms and bushfires causing injuries, spreading infectious diseases and exacerbating chronic illnesses. Heat is a major factor in morbidity and mortality in Australia. In January this year, there were an estimated 139 deaths attributed to the heat wave in Melbourne. Air pollution causes increase in airborne allergens and can worsen respiratory conditions such as hay fever, asthma, chronic airways diseases, lung cancer and heart disease. Mental health problems are exacerbated by the consequences of extreme weather events; displacement, forced migration, deaths, illness, injuries increasing anxiety, depression and post-traumatic stress. Each and every one of these will cause increased demand and pressure on emergency services and emergency departments.

Sustainable procurement, recycling, decreasing waste, and education about sustainable practices will mean the emergency nurse can not only assist the health budget, but influence the future health of their patients. Nurses have always been great advocates for their patients, protecting their health and well-being. In order to continue this in the future we must take the lead and advocate for change; to sustainable emergency nursing.