
A CALL TO ACTION: CHILDREN'S HOSPITALS, CHILD HEALTH, AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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Children's hospitals are unique and inspiring places where, with grit and grace, patients and their families face some of life's toughest challenges. Where the state-of-the-art in paediatric care and rigorous research meets the profound human values that children inspire—kindness, hope, and even youthful joy—to help children live longer healthier lives and overcome diseases that were once incurable. It is now time for children's hospitals to apply their expertise to the next major threat to child health: climate change and the deterioration of the environment.

The global environmental crisis is also a child health crisis. Children are the most vulnerable to the long-term health impacts of pollution and climate change, with damage to cardiac, respiratory, and other organ systems starting before they are born and lasting well into adulthood.¹ Air pollution, driven by the burning of fossil fuels and exacerbated by climate change, is a major threat to child health. The World Health Organization estimates that 93% of children world-wide breathe air exceeding particulate recommendations.² This is a life or death issue. In a landmark report in April 2021, the assistant coroner for Inner South London listed air pollution as a cause of death of 9-year-old Ella Kissi-Debrah and called for a multisector response to address the problem.³

As anchor organisations dedicated to improving child health, children's hospitals have a responsibility to advocate for urgent action and to lead by example. Hospitals, and the

healthcare system in general, are also part of the problem when it comes to climate change. If the healthcare sector were a country, it would be the fifth largest producer of greenhouse gas emissions, accounting for 4.4% of the global total.⁴ To ensure children attain the highest achievable standard of health, children's hospitals must make climate-smart healthcare and the broader environment a priority in all policies.

Children's hospitals also have a responsibility to fulfil the rights of children and young people to participate in decisions affecting their lives, including the organisation of healthcare.⁵ In the case of environmental sustainability, their demands could not be clearer: they want hospitals and healthcare systems to take aggressive, large scale, and systemic action to ensure they have a safe place to grow and pursue their dreams. But despite confronting a seemingly dire situation, young people are inspiring and full of hope and creative ideas about how hospitals can provide care in a way that is not only sustainable but that incorporates nature into the healing environment, supporting their wellness in the fullest sense of the word. In conversations with members of children's hospitals' youth advisory councils, ideas include introducing the arts and gamification into sustainability efforts to make hospitals not only more pleasant places to be, but also facilitators of positive behavioural change. Regardless of how it gets done, young people are clear that they want actions and accountability, not words or excuses.

Examples already exist of children's hospitals taking the lead by incorporating sustainability into their strategic plans and making public commitments to achieve carbon neutrality. Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children in London and Helsinki University Hospital, including the New Children's Hospital, have both committed to going carbon neutral by 2030, with Great Ormond Street taking the additional step of declaring a climate emergency.^{6,7} Children's Healthcare Australasia, which represents over 90 children's hospitals in Australia and New Zealand, joined the Climate and Health Alliance and the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network to support members in taking action to reduce their environmental footprint. And in 2020 the European Children's Hospitals Organisation, together with Health Care Without Harm Europe, published the Children's Hospitals Green Promise, where members committed to act, collaborate, and amplify best practices to make children's hospitals across Europe part of the solution to the

climate crisis.⁸ A unique aspect of the Promise is its commitment to involving young people and making sure their voices are heard; this article is only one example of this commitment, with representatives of children's hospital youth councils involved in every phase of its preparation.

The United Nations (UN) climate change conference, COP26, and the Pre-COP26 youth climate summit represents a chance for children's hospitals to shine a light on the link between climate change and child health and step up and lead at an organizational and community level. There are multiple ways to do this. Hospitals can learn from or partner with peers who are more advanced in their sustainability journey, or join up with initiatives like Race to Zero, the UN backed campaign to rally non-state actors to deliver a zero-carbon recovery.⁹ There are also organisations that offer resources to support getting started or implementing best-practices, like Global Green and Healthy Hospitals managed by Health Care Without Harm.¹⁰ Whatever action hospitals decide to take young people should be actively involved, with their opinions sought and taken into account on what sustainability and nature mean to their health.

By employing the same scientific rigor, creativity, and tenacity applied to past child health challenges, children's hospitals can be part of the solution to one of the greatest threats to child health ever encountered. The young people we care for are watching us and waiting to see if we opt to address the challenge of climate change and create a world where they can thrive in and out of hospital or one that maintains the status quo. Their future health is in our hands: we must act to protect it.

Contributors

JM, KM, and WC contributed equally to this manuscript including the initial conceptualisation of the article and all stages of writing and editing. After the initial idea was developed, GB and FA contributed additional content and reviewed and edited all drafts.

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We declare no competing interests.

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About ECHO

The European Children's Hospitals Organisation (ECHO) advocates for children's health and their access to the best quality care through the collaborative work of children's hospitals. Find out more at <https://www.echohospitals.org>



About HCWH

Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) Europe is the European arm of a global not for profit NGO whose mission is to transform healthcare worldwide so that it reduces its environmental footprint, becomes a community anchor for sustainability and a leader in the global movement for environmental health and justice. HCWH's vision is that healthcare mobilises its ethical, economical, and political influence to create an ecologically sustainable, equitable, and healthy world. Find out more at <https://noharm-europe.org/>

