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Climate change is an issue for us all

Climate change is one of the greatest threats to our future health and wellbeing and it is already affecting the health of millions - yet we don't often think of it as a health issue at all.

According to the World Health Organisation, climate change already accounts for 150,000 deaths per year around the world, with this predicted to increase dramatically in the coming decades. In the UK, the Department of Health has researched the likely effects of climate change on health and the NHS, and the conclusions are sobering:

More people are likely to be hospitalised as a result of major emergencies.

More frequent and severe heat waves will result in increased incidents of skin cancer, cataracts, food poisoning and insect-borne disease.

Higher temperatures will mean that more ozone is generated from air pollution, which will exacerbate many respiratory conditions, already a massive problem in Wales.

A key part of the NHS response to this threat therefore is to make sure our services – public health, primary and secondary - are ready to cope with these sorts of increased demands.

But the NHS's role also involves tackling the causes of climate change, by reducing its own carbon emissions. With 70,000 staff, and over 500 main sites, the NHS in Wales is a huge organisation, with a significant environmental footprint.

Across the UK the NHS uses over 21 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent per annum, the largest public sector contributor to climate change.

It is also a large procurer of goods and services from local, national and international economies. It is the biggest single employer in Wales and is a significant component of the economy.

The NHS in Wales is already taking concerted action to improve its carbon footprint.

One shining example of this is the fact that all major hospital sites in Wales now run on 100% green electricity. This means it comes either from renewable sources, with no emissions, or from combined heat and power, which generates far fewer emissions than standard sources.

Some people have argued that concentrating on issues of sustainability will distract from the core business of the NHS - i.e. healthcare.

Yet healthcare and sustainability are directly linked.

For example, less traffic on the roads would reduce air pollution and have a beneficial impact on patients with certain respiratory conditions. In addition, cost savings from improved efficiency in the NHS, such as reduced electricity bills, can be used to fund patient services – an important consideration in the current financial situation.

There are other wider financial incentives for the NHS to continue to address climate change. The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change in 2006 concluded that the benefits of strong, early and coordinated action against climate change far outweigh the economic costs of doing nothing.

It is estimated that the cost of not taking action could be equivalent to losing between 5% and 20% of annual global GDP, whereas the cost of taking action can be limited to around 1% of annual global GDP.

Failing to take the right action now and over the coming decades risks major disruption to economic and social activity that would be very difficult and costly to reverse.

The NHS is in prime position to lead the way in promoting sustainability in our communities.

By playing its part to reduce carbon emissions, improve air quality, and promote healthier, greener lifestyles, the NHS can make an enormous contribution to creating safer, healthier and more fulfilled communities.

The scale of the NHS means that small changes can make a big difference. For example, if computers and screens were switched off when not in use across the NHS organisations in England, it would save the same amount of carbon as is produced by flying 26,000 people from London to New York and back.

Proof that cutting emissions is as much about changing individual behaviour as anything else.

Of course there is much more to do. Global warming is happening, it has huge implications for health, and – like the rest of us - the NHS has to act now, before the climate becomes critical.