

Medical Education Must Address Climate Change and Planetary Health

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Dear Editor,

Healthcare professionals face an unprecedented challenge: the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss, and pollution – alongside the healthcare sector's own significant environmental footprint. The consequences of anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions (GHGe) are already increasing avoidable mortality and morbidity globally and placing growing strain on the economic systems underpinning human health and wellbeing¹. In this context, integrating planetary health more fully into medical education is both timely and necessary.

It is imperative that medical graduates have a clear understanding of how climate change, pollution, and biodiversity loss affect disease patterns, health equity, and the resilience of health systems. They also need literacy in the environmental footprint of healthcare delivery and how it can be addressed. This will empower doctors to advocate for planetary-health practices among healthcare professionals, patients, and the broader healthcare and life sciences sector. Ultimately, this is about clinical care: understanding how environmental change affects disease burden prepares doctors to deliver safer, more effective patient care, both today and tomorrow.

At present, provision within undergraduate medical education remains variable both in Ireland and further afield. A review of Irish medical schools found limited climate change, planetary health, and sustainable healthcare content². Internationally, only 15% of medical

schools report curriculum content in this area³. While some progress has been made, the absence of explicit national graduate outcomes has been identified as a barrier to consistent implementation².

The Irish Medical Council (IMC) is currently developing graduate outcomes for all medical students in Ireland. This provides a valuable window of opportunity to make planetary health and sustainable healthcare key themes in medical education. Back in 2018, the General Medical Council (GMC) in the United Kingdom added the following outcome in their revision of Outcomes for Graduates: *“Newly qualified doctors must be able to apply the principles, methods and knowledge of population health and the improvement of health and sustainable healthcare to medical practice”*⁴. The IMC must build on this promising start and introduce outcomes that promote meaningful change to clinical practice and consistency across Irish medical schools.

Strengthening planetary health education would also support the Health Service Executive (HSE) in meeting its climate and sustainability commitments. Achieving a more environmentally sustainable health service requires a workforce that understands both the health implications of environmental degradation and the environmental implications of clinical practice.

Involving academic institutions, regulators, and government agencies in this agenda will help build shared expectations across the health workforce and reinforce alignment with both national and international strategy. Lastly, it is imperative that other healthcare, educational, and governmental bodies follow suit, to ensure a similar understanding and approach amongst all those working and training in the healthcare sector.

The IMC now has a valuable opportunity to ensure that future doctors are prepared for the evolving health challenges posed by a changing planet, and to position Ireland as a leader in sustainable, climate-resilient healthcare.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

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