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Planetary Health UEMS Position Paper



This position paper was prepared by members of the Thematic Federation for Green and Sustainable Medical Practice of the European Union of Medical Specialists (UEMS), coming from several European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden)

Our paper drew on the recently published “Lancet Series on Commercial Determinants of Health”¹ and “The 2022 Europe report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: towards a climate resilient future”², as well as recent publications in this field.³⁻⁹



Background

Transgressing more and more planetary boundaries, the habitability conditions on Earth for humans worsen.^{3,4} Activated, self and mutually reinforcing tipping points of the Earth systems threaten to lead to a further acceleration of development. Due to the overlapping of the different dynamics, these changes happen non-linearly. Dependence on fossil fuels leads to air pollution, increasingly frequent heat waves and extreme weather events.⁵ Our food systems, based on high levels of animal foods, require pesticides and more and more land to secure food damaging the climate, endangering biodiversity and globally changing the material cycles of phosphorus, nitrogen and water.^{6,7} This increases the burden of disease in all areas of medicine, affecting all organ systems, including mental health.⁸ Although the global South contributes very little, it is particularly affected. Half of the world's emissions since 1990 have been caused by the richest 10% of humanity.⁹

Up to 78% of the approximately 42 million premature deaths from non-communicable diseases worldwide can be traced back to just four industries: alcohol, tobacco, food production and fossil fuels.¹ In the last decades, the related commercial entities have been very successful in externalising health costs to individuals and societies. These entities have much at stake and are known for their actions of negating, delaying and influencing regulations and policies in their own interest both, visibly and invisibly.¹ They impact health directly or indirectly, contributing to the transgression of the planetary boundaries, as elaborated above.

In terms of the climate crisis, Europe is ground-zero. No continent is warming faster. Heat waves are becoming longer, more intense and more frequent, droughts and extreme weather events are increasing and, evidently, the burden of disease directly and indirectly associated with them.² The measures taken by the international community in terms of mitigation and adaptation are totally inadequate to protect societies from future impacts.

We are in a planetary emergency where health systems are the first line of defence. Ambitious action is required to protect human health. The UEMS calls on policy makers to take immediate action: **Prioritise health promotion in all areas and consistently include mental health.** At the same time, healthcare workers commit to increasing the resilience of health systems in this context of multiple crisis.

The UEMS agenda for resilient health systems

The UEMS seeks to increase health systems' resilience urgently. Advocacy is promoted towards two directions:

1) the medical community including national societies, health professionals, patients, the civil society and industrial partners, and

2) the European and especially EU policy-makers.

Medical community

For the health professions, the challenge is mitigating the planetary crisis and strengthening the resilience of the health systems against external shocks including but not limited to heat waves and pandemics.

For this purpose, transformative education about mitigation and adaptation in the context of multiple planetary crisis should be implemented quickly across undergraduate medical education, specialty training curricula and professional practice, taken into consideration the emerging challenges for healthcare systems.

Healthcare workers should initiate or refine integrated heat action plans including primary and secondary care, long-term care, rescue services, civil society and municipalities, prepare for extreme weather-events, droughts, floods, and wildfires.

We encourage health care institutions to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions across all three scopes and reduce resource utilisation. Addressing over-use / over-consumption of health care services (choose wisely) lowers costs and protects patients.

Plant-based nutrition and physical activity is promoted, with co-benefits for both human and planetary health.

Based on their high societal reputation, health professionals should be strong advocates for health in all policies, attempting to break the hegemony of a biomedical model of health, and promoting broader engagements.

Policy-makers

The UEMS requests the EU Commissioners, members of the European Parliament, and all European policy makers to promote health in all policies. Particularly, prevention of both mental and physical illness must be prioritised over commercial profits.

Actions to address the commercial determinants of health include regulation, legislation at national, European and UN level, trade and agricultural policy changes, taxation (e.g. soda tax), inspection, measures and sanctions vis-a-vis actors, ending of subsidies in harming industries and business models, incentivising investments in business models that are essential for health equity and sustainability.

Strategies for resilient healthcare systems must minimise harm, including resources and greenhouse gases, emitted from healthcare providing facilities, consider the increasing, specific needs in the context of extreme weather events and climate change-specific stresses. Especially, adoption of the new WHO guideline values for air pollutants and a transformation of nutrition systems and mobility are urgently needed.



Concluding remarks

The UEMS positions planetary health and climate change as the major health challenges in the 21st century. The UEMS is committed to the fight for achieving sustainable medical practices and supporting the enhancement of healthcare system resilience towards current and emerging challenges contributing in so to a more sustainable, healthy and well-being promoting future. For this purpose, urgent action from both healthcare professionals and policy makers is needed. Self understandably, this requires a collaborative effort being made from all engaged parties, health providers, and policy makers- at a European and national level.

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