

Sustainability in general practice

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Keywords: general practice registrars, general practice training, sustainability

The links between health and sustainability have become increasingly accepted in health policy. For many practitioners, however, sustainability and climate change remain marginal to day-to-day practice. The lack of modelled best practice, combined with GP trainers' uncertainty about content expertise, has resulted in a skills gap for new registrars. We suggest teaching sustainability skills at three levels: patient care, practice management and leadership/commissioning. The following activities relate to Ten Practical Tips for Doctors¹ and the work of the Sustainable Healthcare Education Team.² Consider asking your registrar to take on activities in each of these areas.

1. PATIENT CARE

Decarbonising patient care

- Read the NHS Carbon Reduction Strategy³ and answer the following questions: What comprises the NHS carbon footprint? What are the main areas in which it can be reduced (e.g. energy, travel, prescribing, procurement)? One in eight cars on the road is said to be on NHS-related business. How can NHS road miles most easily be reduced in your practice (e.g. telephone consulting/tele-medicine; staff ride-share, ensuring patient access to public transport for clinic visits)?
- List the most commonly used medical devices in your practices. Which are reused or recycled? Which are single use, and what quantity of waste does this amount to in one year? Find out what waste management policy is in place and identify potential improvements.
- Document a patient journey through treatment for a common diagnosis, and identify opportunities for more sustainable practice. What potential benefits and threats do these options have for providing patient-centred care?

Improving consultation skills

- Explain the health co-benefits of reduced carbon consumption. For an overweight or a newly diagnosed diabetic patient, identify some of the extended benefits of exercise. Start with the health related (for diabetic prevention or control, on heart, lungs, musculoskeletal system, mood, etc.) and move onto others (general fitness, financial, ecological, example to others, etc.). What might be the health benefits to patients of, say, improved home installation (respiratory, cardiac, seasonal mortality shifts in older people, financial, etc.)?

2. PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Calculate your practice's carbon footprint

- Begin asking the registrar to calculate their own carbon footprint. Share the results with the rest of the practice team, encouraging their thoughts and suggestions as to how they might reduce carbon consumption. Register at The Carbon Trust or National Energy Foundation. Use the Sustainable Action Planning tool (www.sap.greenerhealthcare.org) to estimate the practice footprint. Sign up to the '10:10 Campaign'.

Develop or amend the practice's sustainability strategy

- Identify a model for sustainable general practice. What practical priorities might be identified? What targets can progress be measured against? What are the challenges to developing shared ownership? This exercise can be used to highlight axioms of change management: the importance of a shared agenda, clear goals, commitments and progress measures, the difficulties of effecting change in the face of scepticism or negativity, how to win friends and influence people.

3. COMMISSIONING, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

Identify levers to reduce carbon consumption in the secondary care contracting process

- Learn about sustainability initiatives taken by GP commissioners in model practices and make suggestions as how consortia can be held to account to use the commissioning process to ensure that providers deliver on NHS targets.

Identify organisations working in the community to advance sustainable lifestyles

- List the services and activities that might help practice members or patients to reduce their carbon footprint and achieve practice goals.

Among the Royal College of General Practitioners' curriculum areas these exercises can be linked to are the general practice consultation, personal and professional responsibilities including clinical governance, clinical ethics and values-based practice, promoting equality and valuing diversity, and evidence-based practice. Teaching on sustainability would help in developing competences relating to primary care man-

agement, holistic care, community orientation, holistic and contextualised care.

References

- 1 Griffiths J, Hill A, Spiby J, Gill M and Stott R (2008) Ten practical actions for doctors to combat climate change. *BMJ* **336**: 1507.
- 2 Teaching materials (lesson plans and slide sets) are available at: <http://greenerhealthcare.org/sustainable-healthcare-education> (accessed 02/11/10).
- 3 www.sdu.nhs.uk/publications-resources/3/NHS-Carbon-Reduction-Strategy/ (accessed 02/02/11).

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