

Definition

The relationship between health and the environment are inextricably linked as demonstrated in The World Health Organisation (WHO, 2011) *"Environmental health addresses all the physical, chemical, and biological factors external to a person, and all the related factors impacting behaviours. It encompasses the assessment and control of those environmental factors that can potentially affect health. It is targeted towards preventing disease and creating health-supportive environments. This definition excludes behaviour not related to environment, as well as behaviour related to the social and cultural environment, and genetics."*

Background

The interdependence and the interconnectedness of human health with the health of the natural environment is a relationship formally acknowledged by the World Health Organisation and identified as interrelated with the conditions and resources needed for health. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion (WHO, 1986) states that: *"The fundamental conditions and resources for health are peace, shelter, food, income, a stable ecosystem, sustainable resources, social justice and equity."*

The environmental influences and determinants of health can be considered in terms of the natural environment, the built environment and the individual's responses to environmental influences. (Veitch, 2009)

The physical environment (nature) is influenced by human activity and the impact of climate change has emerged as a new threat to public health with resultant impact on people's health. Australia's climate is highly variable and the increasing incidence of extreme climatic and environmental events that impact on individuals and communities i.e. drought, floods and fires, presents very graphic images of the impacts. The subsequent implications for increases in death, morbidity, illness and injury along with the range and seasonal variation in various infectious diseases are becoming increasingly understood. (ICN, 2008)

The built environment is what humans have created, where some are amenable to intervention and others are not, with subsequent implications for pollution, in many guises, including air and water quality, food availability and quality.

The threat from environmental degradation to human health and survival has been recognised and expressed by the scientific community (Union of Concerned Scientist) and by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The main cause of environmental degradation is identified as human activity.

It is recognised that healthcare contributes to the negative impacts on the health of humans and the environment through unhealthy practices such as poor waste management, use of toxic chemicals, unhealthy food choices and reliance on polluting technologies (HCWH, 2011). However, Healthcare Without Harm (HCWH, 2011, para. 4) also states that *"The good news is that the health care sector can play a leading role in solving these problems. Due to its massive buying power, and its mission-driven interest in preventing disease, the health care sector can help shift the entire economy toward sustainable, safer products and practices."*

Human health and the well-being of present and future generations are dependent on restoring and protecting the integrity of the natural systems which support life in the natural environment and minimising the human impact that has negative impact on ecologically sustainable development. It is understood to mean: using, conserving and enhancing the community's resources so that ecological processes, on which life depends

are maintained and the quality of life, for both present and future generations, is increased. (*Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, Australia's National Strategy for Ecologically Sustainable Development, 1992*)

Rationale

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council (ANMC, 2008) revision of the Code of Ethics for nurses includes the following value statement: "*Nurses value a socially, economically and ecologically sustainable environment promoting health and wellbeing.*"

The World Health Organisation identified climate change as a significant and emerging threat to public health, and in particular to the health of vulnerable populations. The WHO identified that changes in climatic conditions can have three types of health impacts:

- direct impacts e.g. heat waves
- health consequences of changes to ecosystems and biological processes e.g. mosquito borne infections, agricultural food yields
- health consequences of populations who are disrupted or displaced

Evidence confirms that human activity is altering the climate and is likely to impact on rainfall, water availability, temperatures, bushfire frequency, health, heritage and biodiversity for current and future generations. (Veitch, 2009)

Human survival depends upon the will to take effective action now, to create and sustain a natural environment which will support health and life on a long term basis.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) calls on all nurses to be involved in national and multi-sectoral measures to lessen the burden of climate change on the population, particularly those groups in the population who are vulnerable to disease and injury as a result of low income, limited access to primary health care, infirmity and age.

Interdependence and interconnectedness of living things with the natural environment is already conceptualised in nursing theory which integrates the concepts of person, nursing, health and environment in the concept of holistic practice.

Royal College of Nursing, Australia recommends that:

- Nurses take greater responsibility for: informing themselves about the interconnectedness of health with the environment; developing awareness of this relationship in the community; and joining the search for ecologically sustainable alternatives in health care practices and health promotion.
- Nurses seek and support research, education and policy initiatives and strategies by governments and/or community groups to address environmental issues.
- Health care facilities promote awareness of environmental health issues through continuing education/in-service programs.
- Accrediting bodies set environmental standards for the accreditation of health care agencies.

- Health care agencies develop environmental policies and conduct regular environmental audits.
- State and national governments develop policies that provide long term solutions to environmental degradation and protect the rights of the present and future generations to a healthy environment.

Royal College of Nursing, Australia resolves to:

- Identify issues of environmental health concern, so that they may be considered by the nursing profession to recommend ways for RCNA to respond appropriately.
- Continue to promote an effective system of networking, collaboration and information dissemination between all RCNA members and nursing institutions/organisations, including the tertiary education sector, on issues of environmental health at local, national and international levels.
- Encourage nurses to:
 - act as positive role models and promoters of environmentally sound and sustainable practices;
 - provide nursing care based on environmentally sound principles;
 - develop and share their visions for healthy futures and to take an active role in collective problem solving and vision building at local and national levels;
 - plan, evaluate and/or participate in public education programs for healthy living; and
 - develop understanding and knowledge of environmental issues and leadership skills to participate in community issues
 - express positive impacts on mental health and well-being that can be found from contributing to environmental conservation efforts.

References

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