

Planetary health and climate change: strengthening the voice and bolstering health and wellbeing in children and young people

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Anthropocene acceleration, a term used to describe the rapid increase in human activities that impact our planet, is destabilising the earth's natural systems, of which climate change and biosphere integrity are considered the most critical components.¹ Climate change has already started to cause impacts and losses to both nature and people.²

Planetary health is negatively impacted when human activity disrupts Earth's natural systems which, in turn, threatens human health and the health of all living organisms.³ By 2023 six of the nine ecological limits including climate change had been exceeded. Of concern is that health impacts occur even before these thresholds are crossed, eroding the earth's resilience, further accelerating environmental changes that will accentuate health risks on a global scale.

Minimising harm is a cornerstone of justice and justice systems, and this principle applies to the health of our planet.⁴ Planetary health integrates political, economic and social dimensions of human activity, including equity and justice, prioritising individual, community and global planetary consciousness.⁵ As health professionals we work within political, economic and social systems and our practice needs to shift to include actions and advocacy to minimise harm that are informed by a planetary health conscience. Taking a long-term view, recognising the ongoing and increasing impacts to health and wellbeing, requires us to adjust our immediate and short-term clinical practice to include a commitment to intergenerational justice.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change² highlights the impacts of climate change on health and wellbeing that can already be observed, such as increased infectious diseases, impacts from extreme heat, malnutrition related to weather events, mental health and human displacement. The legacy of greenhouse gas emissions or ecosystem destruction for youth and future generations is no longer theoretical. If we are to achieve intergenerational justice, we must recognise the potential long-term consequences of short-term, high carbon emissions and ecosystem degradation associated with health care provision.⁵ We have a responsibility as health care providers to minimise significant harm to current youth and future generations.

In 2025 the Lancet Commission on adolescent health and wellbeing published a call to action to ensure the ongoing wellbeing of young people who will continue to be a critical force in safeguarding the future of society and the health of the planet.⁶ Current adolescents are the first generation who will live their entire lives within the impacts of climate change and threats to planetary health⁶.

In their review on the impact of climate change on children and adolescents' health and wellbeing Proulx highlighted children and young people's vulnerability related to climate impacts due to their development, risk for disease, need for nurturance, their limited ability to independently avoid threats and tendency to fear and worry about climate change compared to other age groups.⁷ They are also likely to be impacted both physically and psychologically by climate induced changes. For example, poorer air quality, which

Elizabeth M Forster*

RN BN MN GC (Higher Ed) GC (PosPsych) PhD FACCYPN
Associate Professor, School of Nursing and Midwifery,
Griffith University, Brisbane, Queensland 4101, Australia
ORCID: 0000-0002-1613-0024
Email e.forster@griffith.edu.au

Sandra Johnston

RN. BHlthSc, Grad Cert Sexual Health, Graduate
Certificate Academic Practice, MBA, PhD
Associate Professor School of Nursing, Queensland
University of Technology, Brisbane, Qld 4059 Australia
ORCID: 0000-0003-0527-1064

Melisa Young

RN/RM, BSc, PGD (Paeds), PGD (Mid), Cert. Child
Community Health, Masters (Nursing)
Lecturer, Curtin School of Nursing, Perth WA 6102

Naomi Tutticci

RN BN Masters Educational Studies, Graduate Certificate
Academic Practice, PhD
Adjunct Senior Lecturer, School of Nursing and Midwifery,
Griffith University, Brisbane, QLD 4101 Australia
Project Manager, School of Nursing, Queensland University
of Technology, Brisbane, Qld 4059 Australia
ORCID: 0000-0002-6801-3348

*Corresponding author

affect respiratory illness and food, water and vector-borne diseases due to rising temperatures, rainfall and flood-related events.⁷ Psychological wellbeing is also threatened when children and adolescents witness or sustain injury arising from climate-related disasters and who may also experience geographic displacement and disruption to social supports, family relationships and functioning in the aftermath of these disasters⁷. Post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and anxiety, as well as increases in phobias, sleep disruption and attachment and aggressive behaviours have been reported among children and youth exposed to disasters.⁸

Children and adolescents cannot protect themselves from environmental threats. There is an urgent need to focus on adaptation and mitigation strategies to protect children from the impacts of climate change before irreversible damage occurs to an entire generation's health and future. Nurses, as the largest group of health professionals, can be agents of change. The recent definition of nursing adopted by the International Council of Nurses explicitly recognises nurses' responsibilities in promoting and protecting planetary health, showing that environmental stewardship is now central to professional identity.⁹ Advocacy is a professional duty embedded in nursing and midwifery codes and aims to improve health outcomes and ensure equitable access to care.¹⁰ The most powerful impact comes through policy and systems change, such as supporting policies that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and address climate change at its source.¹¹ There is also a need for improved surveillance infrastructure within communities to monitor and initiate early warning systems to activate before extreme weather strikes.¹¹ Tracking systems with climate-sensitive health outcomes in children, including heat-related illness, respiratory conditions, vector borne diseases, and mental health impacts will provide measurable, visible outcomes strengthening the case for policy and systems level action.¹¹

As educators, nurses can guide children and entire families on how to prepare for extreme weather events and educate on the management of chronic conditions which may be impacted by climate issues (for example asthma exacerbated by reduced air quality) and promote services for mental health.¹² Raising adolescent and family awareness can increase knowledge and motivate patients to change behaviours to protect their own health while achieving lower carbon emissions.¹³ Of course, to be able to empower others, nurses must also understand climate change. This is of particular importance given sensationalism in the media and algorithms that repeatedly display climate change content that can raise the salience of the threat and trigger anxiety in young people.¹⁴ Nurses must leverage their roles as trusted health professionals and champion the truth.¹⁵ Creating a sense of agency for children and adolescents can be done through action education rather than fear-based information, therefore empowering youth with tangible strategies they can implement, allowing for adaptive rather than maladaptive response.¹⁴ Providing safe spaces for young people to engage in dialogue about climate change, can help them to feel understood, positively influencing wellbeing.

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