Climate crisis: Scorecard reveals UK health organisations’ response

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A peer reviewed study has for the first time compared the climate credentials of UK health organisations by ranking them on four key aspects of their response to the crisis.

The climate change and health scorecard, published in the Journal of Climate Change and Health, aims to provide a template to inform future strategy and serve as a call for action.

A total of 28 UK health organisations were invited to take part, including medical royal colleges, the General Medical Council, and the Faculty of Public Health. Some 11 organisations opted to participate.

Amelia Cussans, one of the lead co-authors of the paper, said, "We hope these scorecards will help health institutions collectively transform in response to the climate and ecological crises."

The scorecards tracked each organisation’s progress against four domains: internal operations, education and training, divestment, and advocacy. Each was scored out of 64 points.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health scored the highest at 41.75 (65%), followed by the Royal College of Psychiatrists with a score of 39.5 (62%), and the Royal College of General Practitioners with 38.5 (60%).

The College of Paramedics scored the lowest with a total of 13, followed by the Royal College of Anaesthetists (13.5), the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (16.25), and the Royal College of Surgeons of England (19.5).

The internal operations scorecard rated organisations based on their sustainable policies on procurement and waste, transport, and food, while the education and training scorecard reviewed action taken by organisations to prepare members for clinical practice in climate change. The divestment scorecard focused on organisations divesting their financial assets from investments in fossil fuels, and the advocacy scorecard focused on emission cuts and policy change.

Considering the significance of the climate crisis, particular weight was given to the advocacy scorecard. "Health organisations have an important voice when it comes to highlighting the impacts of climate change on health to the government and general public," said Eleanor Cooke, another lead co-author of the paper.

There are plans in place to repeat the survey and scorecard project to track and encourage further progress.

Commenting on the results, Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health president Camilla Kingdon said, "The college is committed to facing climate change head-on, and it is encouraging to be recognised as a leader among health organisations tackling climate change. As paediatricians, we need to be at the forefront of climate activity, given that the impacts of the climate crisis will be predominantly borne by children around the globe."

Helgi Johannsson, vice president elect and appointed lead for sustainability at the Royal College of Anaesthetists, said the college was pleased to take part in the assessment. “We have already made significant progress in a number of key sustainability areas not covered by the survey, such as our national work supporting the decommissioning of anaesthetic gas desflurane which is one of healthcare’s major polluters,” he said.

A spokesperson for the GMC said, “While not all the report’s categories apply to the GMC, we know that we have significant work to do to meet the targets that we have set ourselves.

“In recent years we have worked across the organisation to introduce initiatives in key areas, and we are launching a number of new initiatives which will be picked up in the next Medact survey, including implementing a net zero plan.”

Victoria Pegna, chair of the sustainability in surgery working group at the Royal College of Surgeons of England, said the college decided to take part in the scorecard “as we felt it was important to publicly benchmark our position at the start of our journey towards creating a more sustainable organisation.”

Pegna added that the college has published its first sustainability in surgery strategy, developed a new good practice guide to sustainability in the operating theatre, and joined the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change, while recognising that becoming sustainable will be a long term endeavour.

A spokesperson for the College of Paramedics said, “The college is a young organisation, so it is at the beginning of the journey to tackle the global problem of climate change, but we fully understand how important it is for a membership organisation to do this and it is something we are committed to. We also have a sustainability network, run by dedicated members, where our profession can share and exchange ideas on how we can champion the climate change agenda.”

Correction: The figures for the lowest scoring organisations were wrong originally. We corrected these on 26 September.

1 Cooke E, Cussans A, Clack A, Cornford C. Climate change and health scorecard: What are UK professional and regulatory health organisations doing to tackle the climate and ecological emergency?Journal of Climate Change and Health 2022;3:1010164. doi: 10.1016/j.jcch.2022.1010164
3 www.ukhealthalliance.org.