



Position Statement

Nurses, Climate Change and Health

ICN Position:

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) concurs with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹ that climate change has emerged as a new threat to public health.

ICN acknowledges climate change as an important issue for the nursing profession, particularly in light of the impact on people's health and nursing's shared responsibility to sustain and protect the natural environment from depletion, pollution, degradation and destruction². Adverse health impacts of climate change will affect health systems and health care delivery.

ICN is concerned that climate change can affect human health directly, such as through impacts of heat stress, death and injury due to floods and storms; and indirectly through changes in disease patterns and in the ranges and numbers of disease vectors, such as mosquitoes, water quality, air quality, and food availability and quality.

In particular, ICN is concerned that the more than 3 billion people who presently live in poverty across the world, will be seriously affected by climatic changes, as they are more dependent on natural resources, more vulnerable to infectious diseases and more prone to suffer the impact of disasters such as flood, drought, fires, and storms. This will seriously impair attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

ICN supports a health impact assessment (HIA) of climate change using a combination of procedures, methods and tools and multisectoral approaches in order to determine the impact of policy, project or hazard on the health of a population.

ICN calls on national nurses associations (NNAs) and nurses to be part of national and multisectoral measures to mitigate the impact of climate change on the population with a focus on groups particularly vulnerable to disease and injury, including socially isolated city dwellers, the elderly, the poor, those living in areas of malaria and dengue and those without access to primary health care. ICN believes NNAs and nurses must be involved in developing national action plans and policies and be part of disaster preparedness teams to mitigate the impact of climate change on health.

¹ Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Synthesis Report, Third Assessment Report. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

² ICN Code of Ethics for Nurses (2006). Geneva: ICN

ICN calls on NNAs and nurses to support actions to reduce global warming and climate change and its impact on health. These include:

- Lobbying for well-designed urban transport systems to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, while at the same time reducing the major health impacts of urban air pollution and physical inactivity.
- Lobbying for housing with efficient insulation to cut energy consumption and associated greenhouse gas emissions, reduce diseases and deaths from both cold and heat, and in poor countries, reduce the need for burning of biomass fuels and the impacts of indoor air pollution.
- Supporting purchase decisions that favour energy-efficient and environmentally friendly products for cooking, refrigeration, heating, ventilation and waste disposal systems.
- Lobbying for nurses involvement in environmental health committees and policy tables that focus on the safety and protection of health workers and the management and regulation of the health care environment.
- Supporting programmes to combat infectious disease, improve water and sanitation services, and respond to natural disasters and thus help to reduce health vulnerability to future climate change.
- Raising awareness of the health implications of climate change and of assessing and addressing climate change risks to health.
- Helping to develop nursing skills through continuous learning in order to adapt to environmental changes imposed by climate change.
- Supporting intersectoral policies and activities that aim at improving health conditions at present, while also laying the ground for more adaptation measures to climate change in the future.
- Joining forces with other health profession organisations and nongovernmental organisations in order to exert pressure on governments to ratify Conventions on Climate Change and ensure implementation and application.

Background

The vulnerability of populations to climate change depends on factors such as population density, economic development, food availability, income level and distribution, local environmental conditions, pre-existing health status, and the quality and availability of primary health care.

Climate change will affect the pattern of diseases and deaths from exposure to high or low temperatures and result in increased climate sensitive risks. As a result it is anticipated that diarrhoea, malnutrition, malaria, dengue, heat stress, and the number of people killed or injured in coastal floods will be higher.

There will be greater frequency of infectious disease epidemics following floods and storms, and substantial health effects following population displacement due to sea level rise and increased storm activity.

There are health consequences of ozone depletion including increase in skin cancer and cataracts. Extreme weather patterns will have serious impact including drought, heat wave, floods and other events and be key determinants of global food crisis leading to hunger, malnutrition, political instability, disease and death.

Adopted in 2008

Related ICN Positions:

- Nursing and Development.
- Medical waste: responsibilities of nurses and nursing
- Universal access to clean water.
- Reducing environmental and lifestyle-related hazards

The International Council of Nurses is a federation of more than 130 national nurses associations representing the millions of nurses worldwide. Operated by nurses and leading nursing internationally, ICN works to ensure quality nursing care for all and sound health policies globally.