

Goes green



UNION EUROPÉENNE DES MÉDECINS SPÉCIALISTES
EUROPEAN UNION OF MEDICAL SPECIALISTS

Planetary Health- UEMS's Position Paper

This position paper was prepared by members of the Thematic Federation for Green and Sustainable Medical Practice of the European Union of Medical Specialists (UEMS), coming from several European countries (Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, The Netherlands) Our paper drew on the recently published “Lancet Series on Commercial Determinants of Health”¹ and “The 2022 Europe report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: towards a climate resilient future”², as well as recent publications in this field.³⁻⁹

Background

As the planetary boundaries continue to be exceeded, the habitability conditions on Earth for humans are expected to worsen.^{3,4} The activation of self-reinforcing tipping points within Earth's systems poses a threat of accelerating development even further. Dependence on fossil fuels leads to air pollution, increasingly frequent heat waves and extreme weather events.⁵ Human nutrition needs, based on high levels of animal foods, require pesticides and more land to secure food, damaging the climate globally, endangering biodiversity and globally changing the material cycles of phosphorus, nitrogen and water.^{6,7} This affects all organ systems increasing the burden of disease (BoD) in all areas, including mental health.⁸

Although the global South contributes very little, it is particularly affected (climate racism). Half of the world's emissions since 1990 have been caused by the richest 10% of humanity.⁹ Up to 78% of the approximately 42 million premature deaths from noncommunicable diseases worldwide can be traced back to just four industries: Alcohol, Tobacco, Food Production and Fossil Fuels.¹ In the last decades, the related commercial entities have been very successful in externalizing health costs to individuals and societies. These entities have much at stake and are known for their actions of negating, delaying, and influencing regulations and policies in their own interest both, visibly and invisibly.¹ They impact health directly or indirectly, contributing to the transgression of the planetary boundaries, as elaborated above. In terms of the climate crisis, Europe is ground-zero, as it is the fastest-warming continent Heat waves are becoming longer, more intense and more frequent, droughts and extreme weather events are increasing and, evidently, the burden of disease directly and indirectly associated with them.² The measures taken by the international community in terms of mitigation and adaptation seem inadequate to protect societies from future impacts. We are experiencing actually

a planetary emergency, in which health systems are the first line of defense, thus ambitious action is required to protect human health. The UEMS calls on policy makers to take immediate action: Prioritize health promotion in all areas and consistently include mental health. At the same time, health care workers commit to increasing the resilience of health systems in this context of multiple crisis.

The UEMS agenda for resilient health systems

The UEMS seeks to increase the resilience of health systems urgently. Advocacy is promoted towards two directions: 1) the medical community including national societies, health professionals, patients, the civil society, and industrial partners and 2) the European and especially EU policymakers.

Medical Community

For the health professions, the challenge is mitigating the planetary crisis and strengthening the resilience of the health systems against external shocks including -but not limited to- heat waves and pandemics. For this purpose, transformative education about mitigation and adaptation (in the context of multiple planetary crisis) should be implemented quickly across undergraduate medical education, specialty training curricula and professional practice, taken into consideration the emerging challenges for healthcare systems.

Healthcare workers should initiate or refine heat action plans in primary and secondary care, long-term care, rescue services, civil society, and municipalities, and prepare for extreme weather-events, droughts, floods, and wildfires. We encourage healthcare institutions to reduce their own greenhouse gas emissions across all three scopes and reduce resource utilization. In fact, addressing over-use/over-consumption of healthcare services can lower the costs and protect patients. Promotion of plant-based nutrition and physical activity can co-benefit both human and planetary health.

Based on their high societal reputation, health professionals should be strong advocates for health in all policies, promoting broader engagements in their attempt to challenge the domination of an exclusive biomedical model of health.

Policy Makers

The UEMS requests the EU commissioners, members of the European parliament, and all European policy makers to promote health in all policies. Particularly, prevention of both mental and physical illness must be prioritized over commercial profits. Actions to address the commercial determinants of health include regulation, legislation at national,

European and UN level, trade and agricultural policy changes, taxation, inspection, measures and sanctions, models, incentivizing investments in business models that are essential for health equity and sustainability. Strategies for resilient healthcare systems must minimize harm, including resources and greenhouse gases that are emitted from healthcare facilities, and must consider the specific needs in the context of extreme weather events and climate change-specific stresses. In line with this, adoption of the new WHO guideline values for air pollutants and a transformation of nutrition systems and mobility are urgently needed.

Concluding remarks

UEMS identifies planetary health and climate change as the primary health challenges of the 21st century. UEMS is committed to fight for achieving sustainable medical practices and supporting the resilience of healthcare systems towards current and emerging challenges, contributing to a more sustainable, health- and well-being promoting future. Achieving these goals requires urgent action from healthcare professionals and policymakers at a European and national level.

References

1. Gilmore AB, Fabbri A, Baum F, et al. Defining and conceptualising the commercial determinants of health. *The Lancet* 2023;401(10383):1194-213. doi: 10.1016/S01406736(23)00013-2
2. van Daalen KR, Romanello M, Rocklöv J, et al. The 2022 Europe report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: towards a climate resilient future. *The Lancet Public Health* 2022;7(11):e942- e65. doi: 10.1016/S2468-2667(22)00197-9
3. Core Writing Team HLaJRe. Synthesis Report. A Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. Contribution of Working Groups I, II and III to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. In: IPCC, ed. Climate Change 2023: IPCC, 2023:Geneva, Switzerland, (in press).
4. Kemp L, Xu C, Depledge J, et al. Climate Endgame: Exploring catastrophic climate change scenarios. *Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A* 2022;119(34):e2108146119. doi: 10.1073/pnas.2108146119 [published Online First: 2022/08/02]
5. Romanello M, Di Napoli C, Drummond P, et al. The 2022 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: health at the mercy of fossil fuels. *The Lancet*

2022;400(10363):1619-54. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(22)01540-9

6. Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, et al. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *The Lancet* 2019;393(10170):447-92. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(18)31788-4
7. Poertner LM, Lambrecht N, Springmann M, et al. We need a food system transformation – in the face of the Ukraine war, now more than ever. 2022 doi: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.6461468>
8. Watts N, Amann M, Arnell N, et al. The 2020 report of The Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: responding to converging crises. *The Lancet* 2021;397(10269):129-70. doi: 10.1016/S0140-6736(20)32290-X
9. Ghosh E, Gore T, Kartha S, et al. The Carbon Inequality Era: An assessment of the global distribution of consumption emissions among individuals from 1990 to 2015 and beyond 2020.