

Workshop summary: Sustainability and climate change at the RCOG (July 2023)



Royal College of
Obstetricians &
Gynaecologists

Introduction

In July 2023 Dr Ranee Thakar held an online workshop on the [College's ambition for sustainability and climate change](#), one of her key priority areas as RCOG President.

Around 50 RCOG Members, Fellows, Trainees and Associates from the UK and across the world attended, discussing the practicalities of delivering more sustainable care and sharing their views on the College's future activity responding to climate change.

Before discussion in facilitated breakout rooms, attendees heard from Dr Ranee Thakar about the health impacts of climate change, RCOG Chief Executive Kate Lancaster about the College's progress to date in this area, and RCOG representatives on the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change [Green Surgery Project](#) on progress towards sustainable surgery. A recording of the presentations can be found [here](#).

Outcome and next steps

Dr Ranee Thakar extends her thanks to all attendees for taking the time to contribute to this session. The information gathered during the breakout rooms, summarised below, will help shape all new work on this issue across the College. It will help to ensure that support provided to membership is appropriate and practical, and that concerns about the health impacts of climate change are accurately reflected to policymakers. We will publish further detail on this ambition in autumn 2023.

Breakout room summary

1. How can the College support members to integrate sustainability into day-to-day practice?

The NHS produces around 4% of the UK's total carbon emissions. Alongside local initiatives and national programmes such as the Greener NHS programme, Royal Colleges have a role in supporting their members to implement more sustainable care.

Members told us the College should consider...

The role of education, guidance, and research

- Sustainability is a new topic for lots of people and isn't always considered in practice – there is a need for more education and to raise awareness. To be seen as priority by all, it should be included in curricula (e.g., Basic Practical Skills, or new modules on sustainability in obstetrics), made a theme of RCOG World Congress, and embedded into every conversation the RCOG has.
- Publicising existing resources such as the Green Surgery Checklist and Centre for Sustainable Healthcare introductory course.
- Sustainable care included in all future guidelines – 'greening our Green Top Guidance'
- Support research initiatives to show impact of climate change, pollution and unsustainable practice on women's health and pregnancy outcomes.

- Consider the environmental impacts of technological advances, including the introduction of AI into the specialty.

The need for practical support for implementing more sustainable care

- Provide resources on best practice in key sustainability areas, for clinics as well as surgery.
- Provision of accessible information on sustainable care, such as a sustainability dashboard or encouraging local use of climate impact apps.
- Provide information on sustainability and emissions of single-use vs reusable items and different types of surgery. It is essential that all information supports patient safety, the choice of treatment options, and waiting list reduction.
- Support efficient pathways and digitalisation of healthcare to reduce unnecessary travel and paper use.
- Support collaboration and networks with people who have already implemented actions to make care more sustainable.
- Engage with and influence medical device and pharmaceutical companies to support sustainable reductions in medical waste, single-use items, and packaging. Make this a requirement in sponsorship agreements.

Increasingly sustainable engagement with its membership

- Following the success of RCOG exams now being closer to candidates, consider whether more RCOG courses and events can be virtual. Encourage people travelling to conferences to travel sustainably and incentivise virtual attendance.

Good practice examples shared included:

- Use of the [Green Theatre Checklist](#) boosted engagement and empowered people to have conversations about the environment.
- Collaboration with anaesthetists to raise awareness and tackle Entonox waste.
- Introduction of Green Champions in each unit.
- Use of washable and reusable drapes and gowns in some hospitals.

2. How can the College support members to talk to women and service users about climate change, environmental pollution, or sustainable healthcare?

This question aimed to understand whether members would like more information and support on particular issues, and whether they feel confident talking about climate change or the health impacts of specific issues such as air pollution while delivering care.

Members' suggestions and concerns for the College to consider included...

- Several attendees noted their concern about adding additional requirements to already time-pressured clinics, that it felt impractical to have those conversations. Some thought it should be a required and normalised part of consultations.
- There is a need for more communication about these issues to the broader public, membership, patients and staff. Without fully understanding the issues it is difficult to involve patients, and so College information, guidance or educational events for its membership are also relevant here.

- Service users don't often ask about sustainability. Though some thought there was interest, there is a lack of information and few attendees had seen patient information on environmental issues.
- Infographics, posters and QR codes in clinical areas would be helpful, along with robust patient information in multiple languages. Administrative teams could support information sharing.
- Need to carefully consider how to share information on sustainability of care to ensure choice about treatment options and patient safety are supported.
- Consider information on healthy eating, sustainable and reusable period products, breastfeeding, birth choices, sustainable travel to the clinic, preventative health and air pollution.

3. Which issues should the College be talking about with policymakers?

The College's policy and public affairs team aims to improve the health of women and girls by influencing positive change within the UK governments. This includes highlighting when members are seeing specific health impacts linked to climate change or environmental pollution in practice.

Members discussed issues for the College to focus on in future, including...

Increased focus on emissions reduction and the global picture

- Need to widen the focus to fossil fuel consumption and reduction in greenhouse gas emissions – urgency of action, extreme heat increasingly becoming a problem.
- Talk about the unequal impacts on women globally – advocacy on international climate commitments and commitments to global aid in response to the impacts of climate disaster.

The significance of preventative healthcare

- For example, supporting good pelvic floor health could help reduce need for continence products.
- Stronger government support and legislation for healthy and sustainable diets – members noted health problems from high consumption of red meat and dairy, and that nutrition and obesity had more of a health impact overall than air pollution.

Continued advocacy on the need for cleaner air

- This should remain a focus, including raising awareness with members – pollution also occurs around hospitals, and not all healthcare professionals know about the risks to health and pregnancy outcomes.
- Work closely with air pollution organisations such as Clean Air Fund to add voices of healthcare professionals to more comprehensive recommendations.
- Highlight that some actions to reduce air pollution, such as active travel, come with health benefits.