



WONCA Planetary Health Equitable and Sustainable Events Policy 2023

Human health and well-being are intimately linked to the health of our environment. Our health depends on the health of natural systems which provide us with clean air, clean water, nutritious food, protection from infectious diseases, medicines, and stable climates. Damaging these natural systems poses major risks to human health.^{1,2} Maintaining healthy ecosystems and a stable climate is a foundation of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, which were adopted in 2015 and are supported by the global community of family doctors.³ To achieve a healthy, sustainable and equitable future, we must act urgently to safeguard planetary health.^{1,4,5}

WONCA recognizes the Climate Emergency and has made a call for all family doctors to act for planetary health.^{2,6} Primary healthcare and family medicine play a critical role in reducing the environmental footprint of the healthcare sector. Delivering health promotion, interventions, preventive and community-based models of care, can reduce the need for high resource acute care in the hospital sector.⁷ However, many aspects of family medicine have a substantial environmental footprint that needs to be urgently addressed.^{8,9}

Addressing environmental sustainability as family doctors requires us to minimise our carbon footprint in our workplaces, in personal lives and within WONCA as an organisation. WONCA has a proud history of holding world-class events for family doctors, however events of this scale can have a significant carbon footprint. Nevertheless, it is important to have opportunities to meet and connect as family doctors from around the world, whether that be through virtual, hybrid or face to face meetings. It is essential to reduce the environmental impact of these meetings and conferences, in particular those held face to face. Through a social justice lens, high income countries hosting events have a greater responsibility for ensuring events are conducted in an environmentally sustainable manner. This is because high income countries have historically contributed more to climate change, have benefited from the economic development this has produced, and have greater means to transition to sustainable practices.

Sustainability Leadership

Addressing environmental sustainability requires strong leadership to ensure the incorporation of sustainability principles during each stage of event planning.

The International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) has released [Recommendations for Sustainable and Climate-friendly Meetings](#).¹⁰ This comprehensive guide includes recommendations in the areas of: accommodation and venue; transportation; food and beverage; material use; and merchandise.

Venue and Accommodation

Hotels and conference venues are substantial emitters because of the intensive energy use of their buildings and operations.¹¹ It is important to prioritize venues that demonstrate ethical treatment of local staff and implement practices to reduce their carbon and environmental footprints, including leadership in clean energy usage and environmental design. Consider venues that score well using the [Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative](#) methodology.

Transport

The transport sector is responsible for around 24% of total energy-related carbon emissions. Aviation contributes around 12% of total carbon emissions from transport and is far more energy intensive than other forms of transport.¹² The carbon footprint of different forms of travel can be calculated using online calculators. Active transport such as walking and cycling, (e.g. bicycle rental options), and public transport (e.g. trains or buses) should be encouraged wherever possible. The 2018 IFMSA General Assembly brought together over 900 attendees in the first IFMSA carbon neutral event. Of the event's emissions, 88% were from flights. Aviation should be limited to where it is necessary and ideally offset.¹³ Delegates can be encouraged to offset their flights independently or supported to do this as part of the event registration process. The selection of event location can help to minimise flights and other travel-related emissions to and within the host city. Event teams can provide delegates with public transport maps and guides and arrange transport leaders and/or group meet-ups and be encouraged to stay in locations where the event venue is accessible by active or public transport.

Beverages

In 2007, more than 200 billion litres of bottled water were sold, which required over 300 billion MJ_(th) of energy to be produced. The carbon footprint of bottled water stems mostly from the manufacturing of plastic bottles. Using bottled water requires up to 2000 times the energy compared to tap water. The manufacture of reusable cups requires more energy than disposable cups. However, the nature of a reusable cup is that it can be used multiple times. Generally speaking, reusable cups (glass, ceramic, etc.) are more environmentally friendly, especially where these are used for multiple events, and not specifically produced for the meeting or conference.

Food

Food production accounts for around 35% of human greenhouse gas emissions.¹⁴ Much of these emissions come from the consumption of red meat and dairy products. The equivalent amount of protein from plant-based sources produces significantly less emissions compared with animal-

based foods. A diet low in animal products also has additional health benefits, including reduced incidence of ischaemic heart disease and cancer.¹⁵ Approximately one third of all food is lost or wasted. Minimising food wastage is also important to reduce the environmental footprint of events.¹⁶ Finally, when sourcing catering, organisers should prioritise suppliers able to provide a menu rich in plant-based foods and avoid red meat. Our committee suggests that exceptions to this general principle may include culturally sensitive situations where red meat is desirable for the purposes of celebrating or honouring culture (e.g. Indigenous cultures in remote areas may honour and rely upon red meat), or where it is the only accessible source of protein at the venue.

Sponsors/ Partners / Exhibitors Stands

Merchandise can contribute to polluting waste and the carbon footprint of the event. Sponsors and exhibitors should be instructed to limit merchandise and all disposable materials such as paper hand-outs. They should be encouraged to have QR codes readily visible that link to important information. This is in line with WONCA's sustainable events policy. Furthermore, event organisers should actively explore partnering with organisations that promote sustainability.

Policy Recommendations

The WONCA Working Party on the Environment recommend the following:

1. Event organising committees discuss with WONCA, the possibility of organising completely online events or offering online attendance options to participants (hybrid events).
2. Event organising committees appoint an Environmental Officer who is responsible for ensuring:
 - a. Environmental sustainability is incorporated into all aspects of event organisation.
 - b. Whenever possible, environmental health activities are included in the event's academic program; and
 - c. Reporting on the environmental footprint of the event to evaluate success and to provide additional guidance for organisers of future events held by WONCA and its members.

Furthermore, we call upon:

3. The WONCA Executive, Working Parties and Special Interest Groups to:
 - a. Promote sustainability principles at all meetings and events
 - b. Consider offering hybrid events with virtual participation facilities whenever appropriate
 - c. Consider their own transport and attendance arrangements
 - d. Encourage event organising teams to reduce the environmental impact of all major events, including world, regional, working party and member organisation conferences.
4. WONCA event organising teams to reduce the environmental impact of their events through the following means:
 - a. Considering sustainable options for:
 - i. Venue selection
 - ii. Virtual participation
 - iii. Active transport options and public transport options
 - iv. Healthy climatization with minimal energy use

- v. Procurement of equipment and supplies
 - vi. Minimisation of single-use paper and plastic
 - vii. Catering
 - viii. Waste management
 - ix. Promotion
- b. Promoting sustainable practices to delegates concerning:
- i. Transport choices
 - ii. Food choices
 - iii. Beverage choices
 - iv. Health co-benefits of transport and dietary choices (12)
 - v. Apparel choices – acknowledging the importance of sustainable fashion
 - vi. Offsetting emissions, that are unable to be avoided, by:
 - vii. Encouraging and ideally providing mechanisms for delegates to offset their emissions relating to event participation, which may include a provision for delegates from high-income countries to contribute to a carbon offset pool from which funds are taken to offset travel from low- and middle-income countries
 - viii. Making budgetary allowances to offset the carbon emissions remaining at the conclusion of events.
5. WONCA Member Organisations to:
- a. Consider the environmental impact of their own events and consider reductions as recommended for events teams.
6. Family Doctors to:
- a. Choose events they wish to attend wisely with consideration of the environmental ramifications of their travel
 - b. Encourage event organisers to hold environmentally sustainable events
 - c. Choose sustainable transport options for both travel to the conference city, and within the city, and to and from the event location
 - d. Aim to always bring a reusable water bottle and cup to events
 - e. Carbon offset personal flights to events when flights are required

Checklist for Planetary Health Equitable and Sustainable Conference and Event Planning

The following is recommended in all settings, but some initiatives may be difficult to achieve or not available in low and some middle-income country settings, and therefore should be judiciously adapted. It is expected that: event planning; procurement, equipment and materials; monitoring and reporting; and raising awareness, should be able to be undertaken in all settings, in addition to items marked with an asterisk (*). It is also advisable to discuss with the WONCA Secretariat if in case any of the asterisked recommendations could not be adhered to, due to an acceptable reason.

Event Planning	Yes / No	Notes
Develop a sustainability action plan*		
Have a dedicated Environment Officer or sustainability team*		
Communicate your sustainability commitments to attendees and stakeholders*		
Venue selection		
Choose a venue with a green policy, action plan and established reporting procedures. Consider those that score well using the Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative methodology.		
Choose a venue that has green building certification		
Consider venue accessibility by walking or public transport*		
Choose a venue able to facilitate videoconferencing allowing for hybrid events*		
Choose a venue where climatization can be adjusted to minimize energy consumption while ensuring a healthy temperature.		
Procurement, equipment, and materials		
Take steps to minimise printed materials (including event programs, delegate handbooks and abstract booklets) by using electronic communication wherever possible (e.g. websites, apps, email, SMS etc.)*		
Include in event communication messages asking attendees to avoid non-essential printing for the sake of the environment*		

If printing is unavoidable, consider printed double sided on recycled content paper and include a request to recycle after use*		
Take steps to minimise promotional material, including delegate bags and other gifts*		
If promotional material is deemed necessary, give preference to products produced from sustainable materials, obtained from local suppliers, with a useful purpose*		
Use environmentally friendly options for name badges and lanyards to reduce plastic usage*		
Catering		
Consider preferencing caterers who follow sustainable guidelines for sourcing food*		
Inquire with caterers about policies for responsible food procurement, recycling and disposal		
Explore use of local and seasonal produce		
Consider reducing the amount of red meat served or consider a wholly vegetarian menu options*		
Use ethically and sustainably-sourced products where possible (eg. certified Fairtrade)		
Highlight sustainable initiatives to educate and encourage attendee involvement: such as serving vegetarian food offerings, using ethically and sustainably-sourced products, reducing consumption, reusing products and recycling endeavours.*		
Avoid single use items such as plastic plates and cutlery and paper serviettes (use crockery, glassware, metal cutlery and linen instead)*		
Where this is not possible, opt for disposable items made from sustainable materials (e.g. plant-based plates, cups made from a high percentage of recycled plastic) that are compostable, biodegradable or recyclable at end of life*		
Provide water stations with jugs of water or bulk dispensers and reusable glasses instead of bottled water*		
Encourage attendees to bring reusable water bottles and reusable coffee cups*		

Waste		
Ensure the venue or organizers have a waste stream management system. (e.g. general waste, mixed recycling, paper and cardboard, organic waste) with clear labelling and instructions for attendees wherever recycling is available		
Donate surplus food to local food redistribution organisations		
Carbon Accounting and Offsetting		
Estimate the carbon footprint of your event. Consider using the GET (Green Events Tool).*		
Allocate a budget for sustainable and high quality methods of offsetting carbon emissions		
Offer delegates the opportunity to contribute to offsetting the event by purchasing ‘green tickets’*		
Encourage attendees to offset their travel-related emissions*		
Consider initiatives that might increase the likelihood that attendees will do offsetting (e.g. by integrating a calculator in the online and/or offset payment into the registration process, recommending an offset provider)		
Consider including a mechanism for attendees from high-income countries to contribute to a carbon offset fund to offset the travel of attendees from low- and middle-income countries		
Monitoring and Reporting		
Monitor progress on achieving sustainability (starting with this checklist)*		
Report back to delegates and stakeholders (including overall sustainability outcomes and recommendations for future events)*		
Raising Awareness		
Inform attendees of the eco-friendly measures implemented at the event and the reasons for these*		
Promote actions for attendees to reduce their ecological footprint*		
Establish a green stall (stand) to support awareness raising*		

References

1. Whitmee S, Haines A, Beyrer C, Boltz F, Capon AG, de Souza Dias BF, et al. Safeguarding human health in the Anthropocene epoch: report of The Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on planetary health. *Lancet*. 2015;386(10007):1973-2028.
2. World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA) & Planetary Health Alliance. Declaration Calling for Family Doctors of the World to Act on Planetary Health. WONCA & Planetary Health Alliance, ; 2019 2019.
3. United Nations. Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: A/RES/70/1. Geneva, : United Nations,; 2015 25 September.
4. Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) Summary for Policymakers. IPCC; 2023 20 March 2023.
5. Romanello M, Di Napoli C, Drummond P, Green C, Kennard H, Lampard P, et al. The 2022 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: health at the mercy of fossil fuels. *Lancet*. 2022;400(10363):1619-54.
6. World Organization of Family Doctors (WONCA). Working Party on the Environment recognise Climate Emergency: WONCA; 2019 [updated December 2019; cited 2023 1 April]. Available from: <https://www.globalfamilydoctor.com/News/WorkingPartyontheEnvironmentrecogniseClimateEmergency.aspx>.
7. Ballard T. What sustainability means for primary care: primary care leads to better overall resource use and higher quality outcomes. *Br J Gen Pract*. 2013;63(614):457-8.
8. British Medical Association (BMA). Sustainable and environmentally friendly general practice: GPC England Policy Document. London: BMA; 2020 June.
9. Barratt AL, Bell KJ, Charlesworth K, McGain F. High value health care is low carbon health care. *Med J Aust*. 2022;216(2):67-8.
10. Daalen Kv, Sedlak M, de Wit S, Estrella P, Haus J-M, Bähnemann B. IFMSA Recommendations for Sustainable and Climate Friendly Meetings, : International Federation of Medical Student Associations (IFMSA),; 2017 [updated 2018; cited 2023 1 April]. Available from: <https://ifmsa.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/IFMSA-Recommendations-for-Sustainable-and-Climate-friendly-Meetings.compressed.pdf>.
11. Lenzen M, Sun Y-Y, Faturay F, Ting Y-P, Geschke A, Malik A. The carbon footprint of global tourism. *Nature Climate Change*. 2018;8(6):522-8.
12. Ritchie H. Cars, planes, trains: where do CO2 emissions from transport come from? Oxford: Global Change Data Lab; 2020 [updated 6 October 2020; cited 2023 1 April]. Available from: <https://ourworldindata.org/co2-emissions-from-transport>.
13. Zotova O, Pétrin-Desrosiers C, Gopfert A, Van Hove M. Carbon-neutral medical conferences should be the norm. *Lancet Planet Health*. 2020;4(2):e48-e50.
14. Xu X, Sharma P, Shu S, Lin TS, Ciais P, Tubiello FN, et al. Global greenhouse gas emissions from animal-based foods are twice those of plant-based foods. *Nat Food*. 2021;2(9):724-32.
15. Willett W, Rockström J, Loken B, Springmann M, Lang T, Vermeulen S, et al. Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet Commission on healthy diets from sustainable food systems. *Lancet*. 2019;393(10170):447-92.
16. Friel S, Dangour AD, Garnett T, Lock K, Chalabi Z, Roberts I, et al. Public health benefits of strategies to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions: food and agriculture. *Lancet*. 2009;374(9706):2016-25.

This policy brief was written by the following members from the WONCA Working Party on the Environment:

Richard Yin

- Catherine Pendrey
- Sankha Randenikumara
- Özden Gökdemir
- Alan Abelson
- Paola Rava Dellepiane
- Sonja Wicklum
- Alice McGushin
- Andree Rochfort
- Enrique Falceto de Barros
- Terry Kemple