

## ARTIGO DE PERSPECTIVA

# Health Care Without Harm Europe: Empowering Healthcare Professionals to Drive Sustainable Change in the Sector

## *Health Care Without Harm Europe: Um Impulso às Mudanças Sustentáveis no Setor*

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### Afiliação

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Climate Change; Global Health

### Palavras-chave

Alterações Climáticas; Saúde Global

## INTRODUCTION

The healthcare sector is one of Europe's largest industries and has a tremendous environmental, economic, and social footprint.<sup>1</sup> Whereas its mission is to promote health, the sector is a contributor to the ongoing environmental crisis, and it is estimated to be responsible for 4.6% of global carbon emissions.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, chemicals with toxic properties, such as endocrine disruptors, are still widely used, single-use products are common practice, and pharmaceutical residues in water systems are contributing to the rise of antimicrobial resistance (AMR), a growing global health threat.

It is fundamental that the healthcare sector minimises its own environmental impact while working to protect people's health.

## BUILDING SUSTAINABLE HEALTHCARE

Health Care Without Harm (HCWH) aims to connect healthcare professionals, hospitals, health systems, governments, and international agencies to accelerate the transition to sustainable healthcare.

HCWH was born in the US in 1996, when the link between health and the environment was becoming increasingly evident. Back then, 28 organisations came together to address the healthcare industry's environmental footprint and support a sustainable economy and healthy communities.

Seven years later, the movement landed in Europe, and in 2003, HCWH Europe was established, focusing on lobbying for and implementing sustainable healthcare practices on the continent.

## HEALTHCARE NETWORKS

Today, HCWH Europe works with its networks and partners to develop and scale up new models of sustainable healthcare and mobilise the sector to play a leadership role in this transition.

Our networks are the mobilising force of this change: Global Green and Healthy Hospitals (GGHH), Doctors for Greener Healthcare (DfGH), Nurses Climate Challenge (NCC) Europe, and Pharmacists for Greener Healthcare (PfGH).

As trusted leaders within society, healthcare professionals have a unique opportunity to advance sustainable healthcare and influence public policy to better protect the health of their communities from climate impacts. Our growing networks are not only a platform for collaboration; they are gateways to best practices and resources that support members in driving and advocating for change within the healthcare sector and beyond. Our networks of healthcare professionals and health system workers are rising to the challenge of propelling progress in health facilities across Europe.

In Europe, the current Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network membership stands at more than 200 healthcare institutions, spanning 29 countries and over 7700 hospitals and healthcare facilities. The GGHH network is the largest sustainable healthcare network in the world, focused on the interests and needs of healthcare sustainability practitioners. At the same time, over 1000 healthcare professionals have joined our three professional networks.

## OUR PROGRAMMES

With its network and partners, HCWH Europe works across three programme areas - Climate-smart Healthcare, Circular Healthcare, and Safer Pharma. The goals are to reduce the healthcare sector's impact on climate while increasing

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resilience; to eliminate unnecessary single-use products and harmful chemicals while advancing sustainable supply chains; and to decrease pharmaceutical pollution and combat antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

## CLIMATE-SMART HEALTHCARE

The Climate-smart healthcare programme supports healthcare facilities in cutting their emissions to net zero and adapting to climate change, to ensure that health systems are prepared to foresee, respond to, and recover from climate-related extreme weather events.

Through the programme, members have access to direct support, webinars, training, guidance, and practical tools for climate adaptation and decarbonisation, such as our Climate Impact Checkup tool and Healthcare Decarbonisation Toolkit, which can be used to quantify the impact of and create plans to reduce the carbon footprint of anaesthesia, among other areas.

For instance, the Climate Impact Checkup tool also enables quantifying anaesthetic gas emissions. Although emissions from the use of anaesthetic gases are small relative to other sources in healthcare, they are known pollutants with high heat-trapping abilities that persist in the atmosphere for a long time. Notably, the European Union has decided to ban desflurane as of 2026.<sup>3</sup> Fugitive emissions are also an occupational health risk.

Over the years, HCWH Europe has supported hospitals in reducing GHGs with best practices and resources.

Portugal has been at the forefront of this movement. In 2022, it published a national decarbonisation plan for its healthcare sector—developed in collaboration with HCWH Europe and Arup within the Operation Zero project—to put the country on a path towards net zero emissions by 2050.<sup>4</sup>

Several Portuguese hospitals are also part of HCWH Europe's network and have participated in mitigation projects such as Fostering Low Carbon Healthcare in Europe - EUKI Anaesthetic Gases Project and Low-carbon healthcare in the Mediterranean region, taking significant steps towards decarbonisation.

Besides implementing climate mitigation initiatives, HCWH Europe also participates in European projects that aim to enhance climate resilience for healthcare facilities in the region. Boosting climate resilience means equipping health systems with the solutions and guidance they need to help reduce the health impacts of climate change, while addressing its consequences and preserving public health.

## CIRCULAR HEALTHCARE

With the Circular Healthcare programme, HCWH Europe aims to transition the healthcare sector away from unnecessary single-use products and toxic chemicals, focusing on sustainable supply chains and reusable, non-toxic

solutions. In anaesthesia, this means promoting reusable equipment, such as masks and breathing circuits, over disposable options, which contribute to significant waste in operating rooms.

To support our network members in applying circular healthcare principles, we provide a range of resources, trainings, and webinars, including practical tools like the guide Measuring and Reducing Plastics in the Healthcare Sector and the European Healthcare's Phase-out List for Chemicals of Concern.

These resources help hospitals assess and reduce their use of plastics and hazardous substances.

Through initiatives like the Born Green Generation project - which seeks to protect future generations from unnecessary plastic and toxic chemical exposure during the first 1,000 days of life - we help hospitals integrate circular practices into their operations. This support enables them to reduce dependence on single-use items, switch to safer, reusable alternatives, and eliminate harmful chemicals such as phthalates, which can be found in anaesthetic delivery systems.

## SAFER PHARMA

Finally, our Safer Pharma programme aims to enable the healthcare sector to lead a change in the way we produce, use, and dispose of medicines to reduce harm to fragile ecosystems and the threat of antimicrobial resistance (AMR). This involves advocating for the development of safer drugs, taking action on prescription medicines, and reducing pharmaceutical waste.

To support this, accelerating EU policy implementation and compliance is vital to strengthening regulations and incentivising safer pharmaceutical production, use, and disposal. It is also critical to recognise the environment's role in developing antibiotic resistance and ensure that AMR is addressed comprehensively at the EU level.

HCWH Europe has developed a wide range of resources and educational opportunities to support healthcare professionals in adopting more sustainable practices.

In addition, in 2023, HCWH Europe launched the Pharmacists for Greener Healthcare (PFGH) Network, which brings together pharmacists and pharmacy students from across Europe to share best practices and collaborate in joint advocacy efforts to tackle pharmaceutical pollution and its contribution to AMR. By the end of its first year, the network had grown to over 115 members from more than 15 countries. This platform empowers pharmacists to take a leadership role in promoting sustainable pharmaceutical practices, influencing policy, and driving change within their local healthcare systems. The network also facilitates cross-border collaboration, knowledge-sharing, and coordination.

## CONCLUSION

The shift to sustainable healthcare must start now and requires a coordinated effort involving healthcare professionals, facilities, public authorities, and academia. This transition needs to address all areas affected by the sector - from carbon footprint and waste to chemicals and pharmaceuticals.

The healthcare sector has a unique and urgent role to play, not only because of its size and environmental impact - but also because of its role and position in society. Healthcare practitioners are trusted, respected, and listened to. They are perfectly placed to both inspire and demand change. Collaboration, shared knowledge, and resources are essential, and health professionals have the expertise and influence to lead this change with the proper support HCWH Europe can provide.

HCWH Europe exists to equip health systems with the tools and platforms needed for effective collaboration and to drive the sector toward sustainability. From individuals championing sustainability in their workplaces to large hospitals pushing for sustainable practices, we stand side-by-side, sharing insights, inspiration, and innovation, transforming how our healthcare systems work with our networks.

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