WPA Position Statement on Environmental Sustainability

Environmental sustainability is one of the major challenges to humanity in the first half of the 21st century.

The UN Intergovernmental Report on climate change (2014) noted that climate change is continuing at an increasing rate and will have a progressively detrimental impact on mental health in the future. Environmental disasters such as cyclones, hurricanes, tsunamis, heat waves, desertification, floods and forest fires have a significant impact on the mental health of populations (Morrissey and Reser, 2007; Strube et al, 2012) and these disasters are set to increase in frequency, intensity and duration. This means an increase in risk and impact over the coming decades.

1. There is now a solid body of research indicating the effects of such disasters on mental health. Floods are the world's most common disaster and are associated with anxiety (including PTSD) and depression (e.g., Stanke et al, 2012). Suicide rates and rates of psychiatric morbidity generally have been shown to increase during extreme temperature changes (Page et al, 2007; Fountolakis et al., 2016) as well as during drought (Harrigan et al, 2012; O'Brien et al, 2014). Weather-related disasters can lead to exposure to traumatic events as well as to longer-term stress associated with harm to family relationships, communities and employment opportunities and consequent anxiety and depression (McMichael et al, 2010). Risks are elevated in low and middle-income countries and in communities impacted by poverty, where capacity to adapt to environmental changes and access to mental health services are limited (Pollock, et al, 2016; USCGRP, 2016). Health system adaptation principles include flexibility, strategic allocation of resources and robustness of services (Blaskhi et al, 2011). Principles of mitigating the impact are described by Mortimer(2010).

WPA calls upon its member societies to adopt the following strategies:

A. To develop strategies *to mitigate* the effects of the environment on the mental health of the population

B. To *encourage* mental health services to be prepared to best respond to climate change events
C. To *integrate* the teaching of sustainable health care practices into psychiatric and mental health training

A. Mitigation Strategies

WPA recognises that the following principles should be adopted to reduce the carbon footprint of mental health care:

1. To *prioritise prevention* in order to prevent mental illness and promote good mental health, in order to reduce the need for mental health care in the future.
2. To *empower* individuals and communities, promoting opportunities for self-management, independent living through supporting community projects, social networks and employment, all of which will improve mental health resilience.
3. To *offer interventions* which provide maximum benefit for the least environmental cost, by delivering the right intervention at the right time to the right person in the right place.

B. Encouragement of Services

2. To *reduce the carbon impact* of interventions and models of mental health care, most of which lies in procurement of medication, equipment, travel and medical supplies, alongside service unit structural design and operation.
3. Each service must take into account the impact of carbon on services and empower and train individuals to take action.
4. WPA recommends and supports the development of climate adaptation strategies.
5. Developing appropriate mental health services and social capital, including social networks and community supports, which are essential in developing resilience.

C. Sustainable Health Care Education

1. WPA recommends that medical schools and universities include in their curricula: environmental and human health interactions at different levels; and knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to improve the environmental sustainability of health systems.

2. Institutions and organisations must ensure that duties of doctors to protect and promote health are shaped bearing in mind the local and global environment.

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