WONCA Asia Pacific Region Declaration on Planetary Health

Singapore, 24 August 2024.

Preamble

The Asia-Pacific region, with its diverse landscapes and rich cultural heritage, faces significant challenges due to climate change. This region, home to 60% of the world's population, is a major contributor to global greenhouse gas emissions primarily due to its reliance on fossil fuels and rapid industrial development. Alongside climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss constitute the triple planetary health crisis, threatening the planetary life support services essential to maintaining human health and well-being. The health sector is currently contributing to the degradation of the health of people and the planet through environmentally unsustainable practices. However, the health sector can also demonstrate leadership in the transition to a healthy, sustainable, and just future. The health sector can model sustainable planetary health practices, including how to transition away from fossil fuels, toxic chemicals, and unethical employment practices.

The Asia Pacific region also boasts highly diverse primary care systems reflecting the varied socio-economic conditions and healthcare needs of its people. Healthcare professionals, including family physicians, are integral stakeholders in the urgent reorientation of all aspects of health systems toward planetary health – from procurement and energy sources to avoiding low-value care and waste reduction. In light of these challenges, the WONCA Asia Pacific Region hereby issues its declaration on planetary health.

Declaration

Recognizing that pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change pose the greatest threats to global health, we, the members of the WONCA Asia Pacific Region, commit to the following principles and actions to safeguard the health of our planet and our people.

Principles

As family physicians, we acknowledge the following principles that underpin our actions to safeguard planetary health:

Planetary Health Understanding and Advocacy

Promoting the interdisciplinary concept of planetary health, which balances human health and the health of global environmental systems, among medical professionals and the general public is essential to achieving the sustainable transformation of our societies.

Precautionary Approach

The precautionary principle, as outlined in the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), is essential to safeguard the planetary systems on which human health depends. The precautionary principle states that where there is a threat of serious environmental damage, lack of full scientific certainty should not be used as justification to postpone or avoid minimizing such a threat.

Rights-Based Approach

Integrating human rights principles and standards into our health services and policies is essential to develop equitable, inclusive, and accountable health systems that improve the underlying determinants of health for all.

Climate Change

Climate change is already having a significant impact on population health and health systems. Integrating climate adaptation strategies into health systems and communities is critical to building resilience to these threats.

Pollution

Urgently reducing waste and pollution, mainly material pollution from plastic and air pollution from burning fossil fuels, is necessary to reduce the detrimental effects on human and environmental health. Plastic pollution, in particular, damages ecosystems, often contains toxic chemicals, and accounts for a significant proportion of global fossil fuel use.

Biodiversity Loss

Promoting the conservation and regeneration of ecosystems is fundamental to preserving the planetary health services that sustain human health and well-being.

Sustainable Practices

Health professionals have a responsibility to ensure that healthcare services and health-related meetings and events are delivered in an environmentally sustainable manner, in line with WHO guidance for climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable healthcare facilities.

Equity

Recognizing that high-income countries have contributed more to climate change and have greater resources to adapt to climate impacts, there is a particular onus on these countries to undertake ambitious decarbonization and support a just transition for all individuals, communities, and countries.

Commitment

Realizing a vision for a healthy, equitable, and sustainable future requires a commitment to continuous improvement and accountability in implementing planetary health principles.

Actions

Therefore, as family physicians of the Asia Pacific region, we commit to:

Education and Research

Enhance the knowledge and research capabilities of healthcare professionals

relating to climate change, plastic pollution, and health.

Support educational initiatives that foster a deeper understanding of planetary health and integrate them into medical curricula and training.

Reducing Greenhouse Gas Emissions

Strive to reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the healthcare sector by promoting zero waste hierarchy strategies including for fossil fuels, plastics, energy efficiency, and the use of renewable energy.

Climate Adaptation and Resilience

Develop and implement primary healthcare systems that are resilient to the impacts of climate change, including extreme weather events and the spread of infectious diseases.

Work collaboratively with communities to implement effective strategies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and improve resilience to climate change impacts.

Policy Advocacy

Advocate for policies that support sustainable development and the transition to a decarbonized economy, emphasizing the health co-benefits of such transitions. This must include the non-proliferation and phase-out of fossil fuels.

Monitoring and Reporting

Establish mechanisms for monitoring and reporting on the environmental impact of healthcare activities and events using tools such as carbon footprint calculators and sustainability checklists.

Our Pledge for Leadership

The WONCA Asia Pacific Region is committed to leading by example in the global effort to address the triple planetary health crisis, namely: pollution, biodiversity loss, and climate change. We pledge to become leaders in advocating for health and well-being for all and to work collaboratively with all stakeholders to create a

sustainable, healthy, and just future for our communities and our planet.

Conclusion

By adopting this declaration, the WONCA Asia Pacific Region reaffirms its dedication to planetary health and the well-being of current and future generations. We call on all healthcare professionals and organizations in the region to join us in this vital endeavor.