

Protecting health from climate change

The theme of this year's World Health Day on 7 April is protecting health from climate change. Dawn Connelly looks at why the World Health Organization believes healthcare professionals should take action to mitigate the effects of climate change and how pharmacists can contribute

Pharmacists and other healthcare professionals have the knowledge, cultural authority and responsibility to protect health from climate change, according to the World Health Organization.

World Health Day on 7 April marks the founding of the WHO and is used to draw worldwide attention to a subject of major importance to global health. This year the WHO has chosen the need to protect health from the adverse effects of climate change.

The WHO says there are several reasons why health professionals should take action to mitigate the effects of climate change. "There is now strong scientific consensus that global warming will affect, in profoundly adverse ways, some of the most fundamental determinants of health: food, air and water," it says.

The consequent impact on the health sector will be high. Moreover, many of the steps that need to be taken to prevent climate change have positive health benefits. For example, using bicycles and public transport instead of cars in industrialised countries will reduce carbon emissions, which in turn will improve air quality and lead to better respiratory health and fewer premature deaths, says the WHO. In addition, the increase in physical activity may lead to less obesity, heart disease and cancer. The move will also reduce traffic-



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Encourage staff to cycle to work

related injuries and deaths. "The sooner these steps are taken the greater their impact will be on public health," the WHO emphasises.

The WHO believes that health professionals at international, national and local levels have the responsibility, political leverage and necessary skills to protect the public from climate-related threats to health. "Failure to respond will be very costly in terms of disease, healthcare expenditure and lost productivity," it warns.

Global warming poses direct threats to health in all countries by causing more severe storms, heatwaves, floods, droughts and fires. This will cause disruptions in water and food supplies, and in medical and other services as

well as loss of homes, injuries and deaths (*PJ*, 14 April 2007, p420). In addition, higher temperatures will change the burden and distribution of various vector-, food- and water-borne diseases, such as malaria and diarrhoea, which already account for 3.1 million deaths worldwide per year, according to the WHO. The prevalence of asthma and respiratory diseases is expected to increase due to worsening air quality, particularly ozone pollution.

The WHO recommends that healthcare professionals should lead by example and start by reducing their personal carbon footprint and that of their workplace (see Panel 1).

A new body to monitor and encourage energy efficient practices throughout the NHS in England was recently established (*PJ*, 2 February, p109) and several hospitals have already reduced their carbon emissions through participation in the "Healthy futures" programme, run by the Government's Sustainable Development Commission.

Examples of how some pharmacy businesses are taking action to reduce their impact on the environment are given below (Panel 2).

The health impacts of climate change will be difficult to reverse in a few years or decades. With consumers becoming increasingly environmentally aware, can healthcare professionals afford not to act?

Panel 1: Steps to reduce your carbon footprint

Reducing carbon emissions can improve health and save money. Pharmacists and pharmacy staff can take several easy and inexpensive steps to reduce their own and their organisation's carbon footprint (which can be calculated using the Government's online carbon calculator at actonco2.direct.gov.uk):

- Switch off unnecessary boilers during the summer — this can save 5 per cent of water heating costs
- Reduce thermostats by 1C to achieve an 8 per cent reduction in fuel consumption
- Make good use of natural daylight — this can reduce lighting costs by 15 per cent
- Install low-energy lighting — consider using compact fluorescent lamps, which use 75 per cent less energy and generate less heat
- Do not overfill refrigerators
- Turn off unused electrical and office equipment
- Make sure the pharmacy is well insulated and windows are double glazed during any refurbishments
- Buy energy efficient appliances
- Establish an energy policy and communicate it to employees
- Encourage staff to travel to work by bicycle, foot or public transport
- Establish an effective waste policy
- Monitor energy usage by checking meter data and bills
- Set targets and produce an action plan to achieve goals

The Carbon Trust says that most organisations could reduce their energy consumption by 10–40 per cent. However, it recommends starting at a realistic 5 per cent saving each year. Further information and advice for businesses and public sector organisations is available at www.carbontrust.co.uk/energy.

Panel 2: What some companies are doing

- **Boots** ran a trial in 2007 where it applied the carbon footprint label to products where a reduction had been made. Key to this was providing consumers with actions they can take, for example, using cooler water to wash their hair. Boots is now working with the Carbon Trust to develop a British standard for carbon labelling of products, which is expected to be published this summer. The company has invested £5m in energy efficiency projects over the past three years and has improved energy efficiency by 15 per cent in edge-of-town stores by good design and equipment selection.
- Since 2007 **Lloydspharmacy** has been supplying most of its pharmacies with "green" electricity. Energy efficient lighting is being fitted in all new and refitted stores, with more emphasis on natural light and better air circulation. The company has redesigned the packaging of its blood pressure and body fat monitors to reduce the overall amount of packaging and to use less plastic. Reducing pack sizes has also reduced carbon emissions associated with shipping and road freight.
- **Co-operative Pharmacy** uses power from renewable energy sources, such as wind farms and hydropower, across its branch network in Britain.
- **Rowlands Pharmacy** is rolling out a replacement lighting programme in all of its branches where old halophosphate tubes are replaced with more energy efficient triphosphor ones. It is also working with its waste collection contractors to develop ways of recycling cardboard and other plastics/polythene packaging. Medicines are dispensed in biodegradable paper bags.
- **Numark** has a strict three-year replacement cycle on computer hardware and has replaced all cathode ray tube screens with low power consumption flat panels. All new computers since the middle of 2006 have been the latest technology low-energy consumption units. Redundant computers are reconditioned and sold reducing the amount of waste generated.