

Position Statement

Planetary Health

CNA Position

The nursing profession needs to integrate planetary health into education, research, advocacy and policy. The health and well-being of the planet that supports the thriving of all life must be seen as a key determinant of health and therefore of top priority to nurses. As nurses, we must integrate planetary health into our practice, advocacy and leadership.

Recommendations for action

Education and research

- Nursing undergraduate curricula in Canada must integrate planetary health education that centres and acknowledges Indigenous wisdom and insights (Guzmán et al., 2021; Redvers et al., 2022). Nursing students should receive education about the intricate human-nature interconnections and the diverse ways in which this is understood by Indigenous Peoples both in Canada and globally. Learning from Indigenous Peoples about how to live harmoniously with all the Earth's inhabitants, including human and animal species and non-living entities is an opportunity for and the responsibility of all nurses.
- As nurses, we must recognize the rights of nature and the planet. The health and survival of nature and human beings is synonymous and only sustainable if we work to safeguard the environment.
- As nurses, we must learn about the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution on human health and the integration of this knowledge into the cycle of care. Nursing education should emphasize how distinct populations are affected by different climate events.
- The concept of environment within the nursing metaparadigm must be expanded to incorporate understanding of the intricate nature-human connectedness/kinship (Kalogirou, 2020; Hanley & Jakubec, 2019).
- Nursing schools must create practical opportunities for nurses to work with individuals and communities experiencing displacement due to a climate-induced event or those otherwise impacted by climate change.
- Nursing education must acknowledge the inherent interconnections between human and ecosystem health and opportunities for integrating planetary health into their practice.
- Higher education must advance planetary health research to deepen understanding of the interdependent relationship between humans and the environment, including a focus on effective nursing interventions that reduce harm, improve resilience and support individuals, families and communities, in adapting to ecosystem disruption, such as climate change and beyond.

- Nursing scholars must collaborate in transdisciplinary planetary health research to advance the nursing perspective in addressing contemporary complex challenges.
- Nursing planetary health scholars must situate their research within a postcolonial lens, building upon mutual ongoing decolonized relationships of trust with Indigenous Peoples. They have been alerting us and now we must acknowledge the urgency to undo historical and ongoing harms.

Advocacy and policy

- Nurses must support the establishment of planetary health clinical and non-clinical nursing positions in public health offices and health authorities.
- Nurses have an ethical responsibility to advocate for policies that uphold climate justice and planetary health principles (Prescott et al., 2018; Stone, Myers, & Golden, 2018; Evans-Agnew et al., 2024), reduce harmful impacts on the climate and ecosystems, support traditional Indigenous knowledge and increase health-care resilience, mitigation and adaptation.

Practice and leadership

- Nursing care should be delivered through a planetary health lens, from initial and ongoing assessments to planning and nursing interventions.
- Nurses should educate patients and communities on how health and well-being are intertwined with the health of the environment.
- Nurses should be adequately prepared to take on leadership roles in emergency preparedness and coordination, and support health-care systems, communities and families facing ecosystem disruptions that threaten human health and the planet.

Nurses must recognize Indigenous intergenerational experience, expertise and observation to guide their understanding of climate change in learning to live in harmony with the natural world.

CNA beliefs

- Planetary health offers new understandings for health professionals regarding our relationship with the natural world and the importance of protecting and preserving nature for the health of future generations.
- Planetary health aims to safeguard both human health and the natural world in addressing climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss (referred to as the “triple threat”).
- Indigenous Peoples are acknowledged as key to protecting nature, with 80% of the world’s remaining biodiversity within their care, even though they constitute only 5% of the global population (UNEP, 2017; Redvers, 2023; World Economic Forum, 2024).
- They have been stewards and caretakers of the lands, waters and ice, and leaders in ecosystem conservation in what is now known as Canada, for thousands of years. First Nations and Inuit ways of life seek to uphold the Earth as a living being within the interconnected web of life integral to their identity, cultural practices, oral traditions, and language (Kaminski, 2016).
- First Nations, Inuit and Métis are key partners in conserving nature through traditional



ways of knowing that support monitoring of climate change systems. They have unique perspectives, knowledge, rights, and responsibilities to teach, to inspire and to preserve a homeostasis of the Earth's natural balance.

- Cultural Safety extends to land, language, and treaty (Sheppard, 2020). Etuaptmumk (Two-Eyed Seeing), a Mi'kmaw concept of the ability to see and appreciate the world from multiple worldviews, must continue to be used by nurses in all aspects of practice (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012).
- Adopting a planetary health lens offers a comprehensive pathway for nurses to acknowledge and integrate Indigenous knowledge of deep interconnections between health, climate and environmental justice, and the preservation of the natural world as fundamental to current and future population health (Brand, Wise, Bedi, & Kickett, 2023).
- The health of all Canadians is at increased risk from the impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and other forms of environmental degradation; however, their impacts are unevenly experienced, exacerbating existing inequities and injustices, in particular those of First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities. (NCCIH, 2022) Adaptation and mitigation of environmental harms are urgently needed to protect the health and well-being of current and future generations.
- Nurses have a specific and critical role in caring for people and the planet.

Background

Planetary health is a rapidly developing scientific field and collective movement. It is based on collaboration between different disciplines and civil society seeking to repair harms humans have done to the Earth's systems and recognizing the importance of preserving and protecting both living and non-living elements (LeClair & Potter, 2022; Planetary Health Alliance, n.d.; Potter, 2020).

Planetary health is informed by long-held Indigenous knowledge and understanding of the interconnectedness of people with the natural world (LeClair & Potter, 2022; Potter, 2020). Planetary health aims to protect the health and well-being of humans, animals and ecosystems in the face of unprecedented global environmental change and is uniquely concerned with the impact of human activities on planetary well-being. Planetary health calls for transformative actions from all and the integration of Indigenous knowledge in finding solutions (LeClair & Potter, 2022; Planetary Health Alliance, n.d.; Potter, 2020).

Put simply, a planetary health lens recognizes that human health and the health of our natural world are one and the same, and to promote human health, we must also promote the health of our planet. Nurses are called upon to deliver care through a planetary health lens, which means that nurses must use their expertise to address some of the most significant planetary health stressors of our time: climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution (the triple threat) (Passarelli, Denton, & Day, 2021; United Nations Climate Change, 2022;).

The triple threat: climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution

Climate change

Due to human-driven climate change, Canada is warming at about twice the global rate (Berry & Schnitter, 2022). Climate change affects the health of Canadians both directly, from



exposure to extreme heat and extreme weather events, poor air quality and infectious disease, and/or indirectly, through disruption of social, environmental, cultural and economic pathways (Berry & Schnitter, 2022; Lulham, Warren, Walsh, & Szwarc, 2023).

Extreme heat, droughts, wildfires, floods, melting permafrost, coastal erosion and loss of sea ice affect Canadians' physical and mental health, the stability of their lives and livelihoods and their children's and grandchildren's futures.

Biodiversity loss

There is growing concern about the health consequences of the rapid biodiversity losses being experienced globally. Biodiversity is fundamental to human health. Consequently, changes that negatively affect ecosystem functioning can result in human health– threatening outcomes, such as impacting the availability of freshwater, food and fuel sources. These are all necessary for good human health and control of pathogens and supportive of productive livelihoods (Marselle et al., 2021; World Health Organization, 2015).

Pollution

In 2019, pollution was responsible for 9 million premature deaths globally, the largest environmental risk factor for premature death and disease (Fuller et al., 2022). This corresponds to one in six deaths worldwide (Fuller et al., 2022). Air pollution is responsible for at least 1.8 million deaths globally (Fuller et al., 2022).

Air pollution is considered the greatest environmental threat to public health and in Canada is attributed to approximately 15,300 annual premature deaths (Berry & Schnitter, 2022; Health Canada, 2021). Combustion of fossil fuels associated with human activities (the primary source of greenhouse gases) and wildfire smoke are key air pollutants (Berry & Schnitter, 2022; He et al., 2024).

Equity, justice, and human rights

The triple threats do not impact everyone's health similarly. Pre-existing inequities are further exacerbated with populations at higher risk, including children, older adults, women, Indigenous populations, marginalized and minoritized populations, equity-denied people and people with disabilities. People who work outdoors and those who are unhoused are also at greater risk to their exposure to the outdoors. This means that the triple threats are not just health concerns but also issues of justice and human rights as those most affected have the least resources to counter impacts or to adapt to accelerating changes (OHCHR, n.d.; UNDP, 2023). Environmental and climate justice are essential in attaining planetary health (LeClair, Evans-Agnew, & Cook, 2022).

Populations that have least contributed to these problems and have the fewest resources to adapt are historically subject to the worst impacts of the triple threats. In Canada, this is particularly the case with First Nations, Inuit and Métis populations due to ongoing inequities, poverty, discrimination, marginalization and the close relationships many have with local ecosystems (Berry & Schnitter, 2022). This is due to the ongoing legacy of colonization, poverty, discrimination, and marginalization and because many live in geographic areas undergoing rapid environmental changes and/or degradation (NCCIH, 2022).



Nurses as essential champions for planetary health

- Nurses are used to being both at the front line and in spaces in between, organizing, mediating, collaborating, working on multidisciplinary teams and adapting actions and messages to different audiences according to their needs or situation. They remain among the most highly trusted groups of professionals (Maru, 2021; Vincente, n.d.). Accordingly, nurses have unique and necessary leadership capabilities required to help the health-care system respond to climate impacts.
- Nurses have an increasingly recognized expertise in planetary health, leading and collaborating on planetary health–related research, policy and educational projects at multiple levels.
- Nurses often work very closely with individuals and communities who experience direct impacts of the triple threats, participate in urgent rescue operations and provide mental and physical health support during and after crises.
- Climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss negatively impact human health. Nursing work includes promoting health in all domains; thus, nurses are morally and ethically called upon to address these planetary health issues.

For further reading

- [Planetary Health Advocacy “Living” Tool](#) aims to foster dialogue and support action to help safeguard human and other species, ecosystem health and well-being and advocacy for climate action, systemic change and justice.
- [Planetary Health Toolkit for Nurses](#) provides concrete guidance to nurses in addressing climate change at the individual, unit and institutional level.
- [The Planetary Health Education Framework](#) offers a curriculum including five interconnected domains that all disciplines can use in higher education and with practising professionals for the promotion of transdisciplinary collaboration on planetary solutions (Guzmán et al., 2021).



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Terminology/definitions

Adaptation: Preparing for and adjusting to both the current and projected impacts of climate change (Berry et al., 2022; United States Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.; Williams, 2023).

Climate change: Long-term shifts in temperatures and weather patterns primarily driven by human activities due to the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil and gas.

Climate justice: A movement for action on the “social, racial, economic, environmental, and multispecies justice issues of the climate crisis through centring the experiences and ways of knowing in frontline and fence-line communities and safeguarding the rights of Nature to achieve Planetary Health” (LeClair, Evans-Agnew, & Cook, 2022, p. S257). It involves centring equity and human rights in all decision-making and action on climate change (UNDP, 2023).

Environmental justice: “[A] major movement and organising discourse in the environmental politics arena, and both the movement and the idea have had a large influence on the way that climate justice has been conceptualised” (Schlosberg & Collins, 2014, p. 359).

Etuaptmumk: (Two-Eyed Seeing) (definition from Bartlett et al., 2012)

Greenhouse gases: Gases in Earth’s atmosphere that trap heat close to the Earth’s surface and worsen climate change. These gases are a byproduct of fossil fuel combustion and other significant human activities. The main greenhouse gases include carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide and fluorinated gases (NASA, n.d.).

Mitigation: The actual reduction of heat-trapping greenhouse gases in Earth’s atmosphere (European Environment Agency, 2024).

Planetary health: “Planetary Health is a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on analyzing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth’s natural systems on human health and all life on Earth” (Planetary Health Alliance, n.d.).

Pollution: “Unwanted waste of human origin released to air, land, water, and the ocean without regard for cost or consequence” (Fuller et al., 2022, p. e535).

Resiliency: Capacity to withstand or adapt to ongoing changes related to climate change or ecosystem disruption.

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