

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dietitians' perspective: Fostering momentum for planetary health change

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Dear Editor,

For a generation labelled as lazy, entitled and narcissistic, the badge of honour millennials wear with pride is *environmentalist*. Worldwide surveys indicate climate change is a key concern among younger generations, second only to the cost of living (Deloitte, 2022).

Planetary health, defined by Whitmee et al. (2015) as “the health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends” (p. 1921), is an emerging interest among health professionals. For example, dietitians work across sectors (healthcare and food systems) that both create an environmental burden through greenhouse gas emissions, resource use and wastage.

As we hurtle towards the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals target, when the central workforce will be Millennials and Gen Zs, it has never been more important for emerging health professionals to tackle barriers impeding planetary health. Our training should reflect this with curriculum, placement activities and professional development opportunities post graduation centring on opportunities for action and promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals.

An experience I had during the research internship of my training, alongside another student and supported by senior educators, was to analyse workshop data from managers and dietitians exploring environmental practices in healthcare foodservices. As an emerging health professional, this experience led me to reflect on traits of my generation and skills we possess that should be fostered and utilised in striving for planetary health.

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1. Championing advocacy & leadership

Our education positions us as behaviour-change elicitors and communicators, who are confident in front of end-users (patients, clients, communities). Many health professionals develop skills in advocacy and evidence-based science to competently communicate with broad audiences, meaning we can become change champions to lead and encourage action within our respective roles.

2. Embedding innovation & knowledge

New graduate dietitians are entering the workforce as planetary health knowledge translators. Program leaders have recognised the importance of new graduate dietitians as innovative, systems navigators (Boak et al., 2022), with an environmental sustainability focus. This encourages educators to embed sustainability assessments into professional placements, which provides students with an opportunity to engage with higher-level decision makers (managers, executives) and observe how institutions facilitate (or do not facilitate) sustainable practices. Additionally, a greater emphasis on cultural safety may translate to more respectful and deliberate immersion and collaboration of traditional knowledge systems in addressing the planetary health crisis.

3. Fostering an appetite for change

My generation's response to the devastating effects of climate change has given us the likes of Greta Thunberg, School Strike 4 Climate and their #FundOurFutureNotGas pledge. Student-led activism is growing in response to a lack of government climate change action, including the 2021 Australian Medical Students Association rallies and Doctors for the Environment. Activism should be encouraged across sectors and levels, including younger generations having a place within conversation on policy development.

Headed into a decade where planetary health will be our greatest threat, health professionals' capabilities position us to be systems navigators, knowledge translators, activists and disruptors across multiple settings. We require a coordinated effort from educators, governing bodies and organisations to prioritise the planetary health agenda as core business. Defining areas actionable for change within each health discipline will help focalise our roles and tailor skills (Dietitians Australia, 2019). Curriculums and workplace-based experiences underpinned with sustainability principles should be customary, as should competency standards expecting proficiency in integrating planetary health into practice upon graduation (Shaw et al., 2021). Gen Z and Millennials' concern for climate change and the ecological crisis should be harnessed as a driving force for progress and recognised not as a generational trend but as a tool.

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