Embedding Planetary Health in BC's Health Care Procurement

Topic Area(s)

* Supply chain and procurement;
* Leadership and governance;

Please specify your project approach

Mitigation only

Key message / aim

The aim is to formalize a sustainable procurement within Provincial Health Services Authority to ensure that opportunities for more sustainable product and operations is not overlooked. We will embed planetary health goals throughout our procurement process and track progress.

What was the problem?

Almost everyone who works at Provincial Health Services Authority (PHSA) and the other regional health authorities in BC recognize that sustainability and planetary health is a key priority. However much of the work is completed as one-off projects and are done outside of or as extra work to the current procurement processes. Projects felt like they are done on the side of people's desks rather than as a normal part of their work. That limits the scalability of sustainable procurement and impedes progress to make real change.

In order to scale sustainable change and not add to the already high workload of clinical and procurement staff, the procurement process itself needs to be transformed so planetary health considerations become a natural part of the work, supported with tools and resources so everyone involved feels they have what they need to be confident in participating.

PHSA's procurement team is a central group that acts on behalf of all the BC health authorities, so the magnitude of the purchasing power in BC health care is significant.

What was the solution?

This is a many year process that initially started as grassroots work and will continue in the future as it now has full senior leadership support. The solution we are working toward is formalizing a sustainable procurement program that is well-resourced and embedded in the provincial procurement team.

* The Energy and Environmental Sustainability (EES) team began engaging with PHSA Procurement in 2017 and 2018
* Engagement included going to team meetings and Value Analysis Teams to talk about sustainability
* One deliverable from this engagement was the first version of an Environmental Questionnaire for Vendors, which was a document of template questions that could be added into RFPs
* Later, an evaluation matrix was developed for that Questionnaire to support buyers in evaluating supplier responses
* Engagement continued in this ad hoc way over the next few years, with the EES team supporting RFPs as able, and meeting with procurement teams. A few key procurement wins came from this engagement work (https://bcgreencare.ca/environmentally-preferable-purchasing-in-labs/; https://bcgreencare.ca/small-changes-make-big-impacts-for-greener-health-care/)
* In 2022, the Sustainable Clinical Services team at one of the regional health authorities, Vancouver Coastal Health (VCH), determined that a Reusables First approach would be a priority going forward. VCH reached out to PHSA to collaborate on a project that would map out what would be needed for change to happen in procurement to support Reusables First. That mapping project happened in 2023.
* Also in 2023, PHSA senior leadership approved a net new role of Sustainability Advisor in the procurement team, that would formalize the sustainable procurement program and work with suppliers. That decision was a tangible and visible endorsement of the importance of better resourcing the work. In 2024, the Sustainability Advisor began work on a brand-new sustainable procurement strategy.

What were the challenges?

Getting time with already busy people is always a challenge. Everyone is very supportive, but don't always see sustainability as a necessary part of their job. Other priorities take over, and sustainability gets talked about when there is free time.

* That challenge lessened when PHSA added planetary health as a North Star Priority, embedding it as an organizational priority and bringing it to the forefront.
* That gave us more of an accepted platform to approach key partners on, as everyone was aware that the highest levels of leadership expected teams to incorporate planetary health in their work.

As PHSA purchases on behalf of the other health authorities, there was (and to some extent still is) a lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities. PHSA has said that they only do what the health authorities ask of them, while the health authorities say that PHSA holds the purchasing power to make sustainable change happen.

* The mapping project in 2023 helped to clarify roles and create more detailed outlines of responsibility.

What helped the intervention implementation/success?

Planetary health is a large and growing topic in BC health care. As public sector organizations, health care organizations have been mandated by government since 2010 to be carbon neutral by paying annual offsets that are used in a green revolving fund structure. The topic of sustainability is not new, and now in 2024 we no longer need to "make the case" for sustainability just to get traction. We're in a good place of just needing to figure out how to operationalize and scale change for the biggest impact.

What were the results/Impact?

Patient outcomes:

This work is system change, rather than a discrete project, and measuring patient outcomes is difficult at that system level. However, we can look to specific changes that resulted from sustainable procurement innovation to see the patient outcome benefits.

St. Paul’s Hospital was the first site in BC to trial reusable surgical gowns, borne out of necessity during the Covid pandemic when the hospital needed to continue surgical operations at full capacity but their stock of disposable surgical gowns was unstable. Reusable surgical gowns laundered locally was the solution, resulting in the hospital continuing to perform surgical procedures at near full capacity throughout the pandemic.

(https://bcgreencare.ca/threads-of-change/)

Population outcomes:

Addressing the negative environmental impacts from the provision of health care can only help population health. Sustainable procurement is supported by clinicians adapting how they provide care, reducing unnecessary tests and unnecessary materials. Procurement can both lead and support change.

Environmental impact:

The environmental impact of the change isn't yet known. We plan to calculate our Scope 3 emissions for the first time in 2024 and then we can build out plans to address the highest supply chain categories first. Once we know our contribution we will set reduction targets and monitor progress.

Social impact:

We are taking a holistic view of sustainable procurement, by not only looking at environmental but also social, ethical and Indigenous procurement. The Director of Indigenous Relations and Procurement at PHSA is actively working to strengthen the relationships between PHSA and Indigenous communities and businesses. PHSA believes that Indigenous procurement is sustainable procurement.

We are also going to be supported by a new Supplier Code of Conduct policy, which outlines our expectations of our suppliers and their own supply chains. We will baseline our suppliers progress on ethical labour practices, elimination of modern slavery in supply chains, Indigenous reconciliation, and environmental sustainability and emissions reduction and then develop progress plans that we expect them to support us with.

Financial impacts:

Again, we don't have any concrete financial data to share, but we know that even if some change costs more money, there will be savings in other areas including making our delivery of care more efficient and timely in order to free up more intensive care units.

What were the learning points?

Everyone in PHSA, and especially in the Procurement team, sees that planetary health and sustainability needs to be part of how we do business going forward. Even if sustainability changes were always expensive and disruptive, climate change is even more expensive and disruptive to business operations. We quite literally cannot afford to continue working and providing care in the same ways.

PHSA Procurement leadership and the support from all BC's health authorities makes this work possible, and collaboration and strong relationships is absolutely key to success.

Highlighting the co-benefits to patient care and outcomes, increase in staff morale and engagement, and operational efficiencies is a great way to get buy-in from all levels. Embedding sustainability is not only beneficial for planet, but also for every person who access the health care system or who supports care.

It's important to have a full and clear understanding of how procurement happens in your organization, and I recommend starting by talking to a lot of people about their work. Map out current process and get involved.

Next steps

We have developed a strategic workplan for 2024 and are also in the process of developing a high level strategic roadmap for the next 5-10 years. This will continue to bring home the importance of sustainability in procurement and bring everyone along.

Education and tools/job aids will be another big focus this year. Everyone wants to contribute but sometimes they don't know how. We want to support them to be able to bring these changes into their own work and feel confident doing so.

Sustainable procurement is relevant for any organization, and it can only bring benefits to not only the organization itself, but the multiple tiers of supply chain, the local economy, the local population, and the planet.

Want to know more?

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Has this case study or story been made public in any form before?No

Resources and Refereces

CASCADES will soon publish a publicly available playbook that outlines some of the work that has happened, specifically with using procurement to advance our Reusables First priority. That will be available this summer at <https://cascadescanada.ca/>