

A greener future

Ben Whittaker and **Sonia Roschnik** look at sustainable healthcare as a concept, and share some examples of sustainable occupational therapy practice from around the UK

Despite the ongoing challenges of dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic, NHS England has signalled its intention to become the world's first 'net zero' health service by 2040 (see page 12). Its recent report *Delivering a 'Net Zero' National Health Service* (www.england.nhs.uk/greenernhs/a-net-zero-nhs) details evidence-based actions to embed sustainability across the NHS.

But what exactly is sustainable healthcare? Put simply, it is using resources to deliver healthcare today without compromising the health of current or future generations.

For a healthcare system to be sustainable, it needs to be financially viable, avoid impacting negatively on the environment, and meet the needs of the patient, staff, carers and community.

These economic, environmental and social agendas are interrelated and interdependent, and known collectively as the 'triple bottom line', and policies and procedures exist for sustainable commissioning and procurement in healthcare to take this into account.

Another question we might ask is, why should occupational therapists care about sustainable healthcare? The UK government declared a climate emergency in 2019, and increasing numbers of cities, healthcare organisations and hospitals have followed suit.

This issue concerns every healthcare professional because a climate emergency is also a health emergency.

The UK's health sector produces over five per cent of the country's greenhouse gases. The NHS Long-term Plan made a commitment to meet the UK government's legally binding carbon targets (NHS 2019).

When NHS chief executive Sir Simon Stephens announced the Greener NHS Campaign in January, he established an NHS expert panel to explore ways to

move towards carbon net zero, saying that this result would help prevent illness, reduce pressure on accident and emergency departments and, crucially, save tens of thousands of lives.

Allied health professions are part of the solution. Therapy-based care is often highly sustainable, providing long-term, preventative, patient-centred benefit at low environmental and financial cost.

Practice can still be further improved, however, and sustainability is now a priority for the chief allied health professions officer Suzanne Rastrick. Her team, working across NHS England and NHS Improvement and Public Health England, will be publishing a report next year detailing ways that AHPs can contribute to the net zero agenda. They have also supported the development of AHP sustainability networks.

Sustainability will be a key theme of the next AHP strategy for England, building on *AHPs Into Action*.

Occupational therapists' involvement in exploring the impact of occupations and activities of daily living upon the climate is supported by such concepts as occupational ecology, occupational choice and occupational justice.

WFOT's comprehensive QUEST strategy includes sustainability as one of the seven quality indicators applicable to all settings for occupational therapy practice.

In its code of ethics, RCOT (2017) states that: 'Practitioners are encouraged 'to re-evaluate practice models and expand clinical reasoning about occupational performance to include sustainable practice' (WFOT 2012).

In addition, the RCOT (2019) Learning and Development Standards require that programme documentation incorporates the WFOT Sustainability Guiding Principles as part of keeping occupational therapy curricula relevant to practice. These five principles address: understanding sustainability;

exploring sustainable lifestyles; adapting to environmental damage; empowering community sustainability; and completing sustainable focused CPD (WFOT 2018).

We know that occupational therapists have lots of other key healthcare agendas to absorb and address. Sustainable healthcare principles can fit in well with existing approaches, including personalised care, public health and prevention agendas, (green) social prescribing and quality improvement.

Occupational therapists can demonstrate leadership in sustainable healthcare by communicating the sustainable principles of our practice more widely and enabling a transition towards more sustainable occupations.

Our profession can make a valuable contribution to what sustainable healthcare models look like in the future. Incorporating a sustainability perspective broadens our clinical reasoning to consider sustainability and the global environment in our models, activity analysis and interventions, which can be summarised by the phrase 'think globally, act locally'.

This more holistic viewpoint will not necessarily change the types of interventions that occupational therapists prescribe for our service users, but would require us to offer the lowest carbon treatment options – such as considering the footprint of adaptive equipment – and to develop the most efficient care pathways.

One thing that we can inspire is making a change in our own area of practice and influence. Any occupational therapy practitioner, manager, academic, student, or member of a governing body, can download WFOT's Sustainability Guiding Principles and use the reflective questions to apply the principles to their own practice, curricula or setting.

Occupational therapists can get involved with clinical networks, such as Occupational Therapy Susnet, AHP Susnet, Doctors for XR, and the regional and local Sustainable Health and Care Networks.

We can collaborate with colleagues from all professions to improve patient care and sustainability together, adopting the SusQI approach, which integrates sustainable healthcare with quality improvement methods.

We could support our organisations to endorse the government's climate emergency declaration, divest from fossil fuels, and set up environmental action steering groups. These are core aims of Health Declares, a group of health professionals and organisations from across the UK.

Join the community of CSH Networks, including Occupational Therapy Susnet and AHP Susnet, where you can share your ideas and examples of sustainable practice: <https://bit.ly/3ezY4Kk>

Explore the Sustainable Occupational Therapy Practice Resource Map: <https://bit.ly/2I8zUdW>

Use WFOT's QUEST strategy: <https://www.wfot.org/quest> and SusQI (sustainability in quality improvement): <https://sustainablehealthcare.org.uk/susqi>

Join Health Care without Harm's global movement for environmentally responsible healthcare: <https://noharm.org/>

Work towards a Greener NHS: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/greenernhs/>

Access the Sustainable Development Strategy and related modules: <https://bit.ly/38jVAyW>

Enter the Green Ward Competition: <https://sustainablehealthcare.org.uk/green-ward-competition>

Participate in the NHS Forest: www.nhsforest.org

Start Green Walking in Mental Health Recovery: <https://sustainablehealthcare.org.uk/green-walking>

Take the Health Declares pledge: www.healthdeclares.org

Everybody can be an 'agent of change'; as legally-binding carbon targets in the UK become more pressing to address the climate emergency, greater numbers of people may want to be more environmentally responsible in their lives.

Occupational therapists can also support this by working as behaviour change specialists with a 'well' population; for example, in council sustainability teams and community sustainability projects. The emphasis is on developing a new sustainable type of healthcare service that serves the needs of everyone.

Many people might be wondering how healthcare can be sustainable in a post-COVID-19 world, but an unforeseen aspect of the coronavirus crisis has been that it has rapidly led to the implementation of more sustainable practice in certain areas of healthcare.

There is no doubt that our health and social care system has had to change suddenly to cope with the crisis. The lockdown has demonstrated that whole systems can change when there is a necessity and a will to do so, and that the scale of that change can be immense, which needs to be the case as we address the climate crisis.

It has also shown that, in the face of a global crisis, the health sector is a trusted part of any response. We should be ambitious about what positive changes can happen as we move towards a sustainable healthcare system.

References

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Cycling in community teams

Going car-free greatly reduces carbon emissions, saves money and brings social benefits. Since moving out of London over five years ago, Jo Coombs, a clinical specialist occupational therapist, has been working in community mental health in Brighton.

She uses her bike to travel across town to work and for her community visits, making use of Brighton's network of cycle lanes.

Despite the many large hills, Jo finds cycling quicker than most car journeys, due to the congested traffic and parking being less of a challenge. She also thinks that cycling is good role modelling for clients, to encourage physical activity and movement as part of their wellbeing.

Jo finds it has a positive effect on her own wellbeing and says: 'There is nothing better than watching the sea as you cycle on your way to your visits.'

Sustainability and COVID-19

In managing the COVID-19 pandemic, there was essential and rapid system-wide change, which led to more sustainable practices being adopted in some areas, such as remote assessment and increased self-management and prevention.

Moving forward, there are sustainable ways of working that the profession might want to consider as part of the 'new normal'. For example, the transition to the digitalisation of appointments and meetings in NHS was underway and could have taken four to five years to implement, but instead this change happened in about three weeks.

There are many obvious benefits, from an increased use of video technology in healthcare settings, to contacting service users and attending virtual meetings.

One of the authors of this article recently attended an online discharge planning meeting for a service user on a psychiatric ward, which was over in under 30 minutes and saved the three remote participants a total of four hours travel time by car.

However, this does not mean that video consultations are correct practice unilaterally. Many people with mental health problems have become increasingly vulnerable when self-isolating at home and the social aspect of the triple bottom line will need to be considered to ensure video technology is used in a humane manner.

As we move towards more sustainable ways of living, there are moments to assess our practice and embed positive changes, and the situation we find ourselves in post-COVID 19 is one of them.

The Green Walking Initiative

Green Walking in Mental Health Recovery is a national initiative endorsed by RCOT, RCPsych and RCN, which seeks to promote access to green spaces for those cared for in inpatient psychiatric settings.

It focuses on walking as the primary activity, seeing this as an example of sustainable practice that provides benefits through exposure to green spaces, movement and interpersonal interactions.

The *Guide for green walking in mental health recovery* examines why green walking should be a right for mental health inpatients and is based on the findings of eight Green Beacon sites, where new green walking groups were facilitated by the ward occupational therapists.

Green walking supports a more socially-sustainable model of mental health care and allows for the opportunity to build links with similar groups in the community.

RCPsych president Adrian James stated that he would like to see the green walking initiative rolled out across the UK.

Bethlem Royal Hospital orchard project

In the summer of 2010, the occupational therapy department at Bethlem Hospital, under the leadership of Peter O'Hare, began a collaborative project with the London Orchard Project to rejuvenate the old orchard at Bethlem. Ten years later and the project is thriving.

An apple press was built by patients in the woodworking workshop, which is used for the annual apple pressing day. The occupational therapy department has a food dehydrator to dry apples, herbs and tea, which are then packaged and sold in the community centre shop.

A large range of horticultural activities take place at the hospital's kitchen garden, including growing produce for use in the occupational therapy cooking groups. Bethlem Royal extended the remit of the project to maximise the therapeutic benefits of the wider natural environment, establishing way-marked nature trails and introducing forest therapy while also collaborating with the local Recovery College to offer courses in improving mental wellbeing through access to nature.

The Great Outdoor Gym Company was commissioned to install an outdoor gym, which dramatically changed the way the outdoor space is used, bringing huge benefits to both physical and mental health.

At the 2014 NHS Forest awards, the hospital was presented with awards for the most innovative site and the overall national award for sustainable healthcare.

Sustainable commissioning of services

Madeline Warwick is a lead occupational therapist at PCaRT North in Northampton, which runs a successful example of sustainable practice she terms 'breakaway groups'.

'These weekly allotment and walking groups are move on groups from our occupational therapy programme,' she explains. 'The groups are not time limited, and are facilitated by ex-service users who have now become NHS volunteers, so the value of occupational therapy and peer support can carry on after discharge.'

'Service users can then form friendships and keep connections with each other. If they ever relapse and need to return to our service, for whatever reason, then they still have those connections, and we haven't seen any readmissions.'

'The allotment project is fully self-sustaining through through fundraisers to coffee mornings, to charity runs to inflatable assault course. We are also crowdfunding for the groups.'

PCaRT North won the Anne McWatt Award for Innovation and Involvement for the allotment project at 2018's NHFT Quality awards. The award recognises the huge impact it has had and how it has changed the lives of so many people.

'It just goes to show that if you invest in something, then the service users do as well,' concludes Madeline.

Reusing and recycling equipment

In 2012, Andrew Shiels was appointed as a band four technical Instructor to sit within the community equipment service (CES) in Ballymena. His role is to refit the recycled specialist equipment that comes through CES, such as modular adjustable chairs and sanichairs, which are the higher cost items, as opposed to the smaller items that are bought in bigger volume.

The equipment is returned and cleansed, then Andrew repairs it and sets it up ready for use. Andrew has continued training so that he can now do more complex repairs and PAT test the chairs, to ensure they are fit for purpose.

The financial benefits have been huge, with similarly large carbon savings. Social benefits include service users being provided with recycled specialist equipment in a matter of days, instead of waiting for funding approval, which can take weeks and sometimes months.

Improving lives, saving money, reducing carbon

Due to the interrelated nature of the triple bottom line, all of the examples of social and economic benefits in RCOT's Improving Lives, Saving Money campaign also lead to environmental benefits and hence can be seen as examples of more sustainable healthcare.

The campaign example of occupational therapists on acute medical wards cutting patient stays from nine and a half days to one day saves about 322kg of CO₂e per patient. An RCOT study of the Frail Older Persons Assessment and Liaison at the University Hospital of Wales demonstrated that this occupational therapy service saved 15,635 bed days in a year.

The huge financial savings of £961,552 were reported by the BBC. There were also great environmental benefits, with the reduction in bed days saving around 575 tons of CO₂e that year.