

Promotion of health services respecting planetary boundaries Executive Summary

In 2019, the SAMS published a position paper on the (un)sustainability of the Swiss health system. This highlighted, in particular, the fact that contemporary medicine is based on a paradigm of unlimited progress, thus creating and being confronted with unrealistic expectations, while the financial and human resources available are limited. The environmental (un)sustainability of health systems was not discussed in detail. However, in view of the environmental and climate crises – and their expected impacts on public health – it seems reasonable to extend the scope of the recommendations given in the 2019 position paper to also include environmental considerations. While recent decades have seen substantial improvements in life expectancy and global health, this progress could be jeopardised if planetary boundaries are exceeded, particularly as a result of climate change and loss of biodiversity.

In addition, health services, which are responsible for roughly 5% of greenhouse gas emissions, will in future not only need to adapt to the health impacts of environmental degradation (heatwaves and emerging infectious diseases), but also question their own modus operandi. This will be crucial in supporting the societal transformations that are required if planetary boundaries are to be respected.

The present position paper, prepared in collaboration with around 60 health and sustainability experts, represents a first step on the path towards more sustainable health services in Switzerland. The seven proposals offered here should provide guidance for professionals throughout the health system (decision-makers, clinicians, in- and outpatient services) in developing concrete measures appropriate to the context in which they operate.

1. Promoting efforts by citizens, communities and institutions to accelerate the ecological transition of society

To protect public health and avoid the creation of further demand for health services, it is essential to accelerate the ecological transition of society. It is evident, however, that the translation of scientific knowledge on environmental and climate issues into political action is unfortunately limited. Improved communication and awareness-raising on these topics among the public and policymakers would thus appear to be crucially important. Growing public awareness should promote the recognition of the environmental and climate crises as major public health challenges. This in turn must lead to ambitious political efforts to ensure that societies respect planetary boundaries. In order to concentrate on the satisfaction of basic needs, with the aim of providing adequate and equitable care, it is necessary for the desires arising from our consumer society (especially regarding health services) to be called into question. Since those most affected by the environmental and climate crises will be the youngest members of society and future generations, particular attention should be paid to their involvement, and to intergenerational dialogue, in democratic and decision-making processes.

2. Rethinking the definition of health in terms of environmental determinants

Our current understanding of the functioning of Earth as a system and scientific assessments of the risks posed to human health by anthropogenic damage to natural systems underline the urgent need to recognise the environmental determinants of health, and to understand health from the perspective of the interdependence of all life. This new perspective calls for fundamental reflection on our conceptions of health and healthcare. The latter must reject the idea of unlimited progress and give greater consideration to human, financial and environmental limits. This perspective highlights the importance of conceiving of health in terms of a global (holistic) and cross-sectoral understanding of its determinants.

3. De-(bio)medicalising and re-socialising health

Today it is important to focus increasingly on health promotion rather than exclusively on technical medical interventions. There needs to be a shift away from an (essentially biomedical) *cure*-oriented system towards a *care*-oriented system, based in particular on strong public health, consideration of social and environmental health determinants (also in medicine), and primary care. It is also essential to recognise the extent to which public health and well-being are affected by numerous public policies and services.

4. Developing a new paradigm for sustainable medicine and care

The current paradigm in medicine places a disproportionate emphasis on the capacity to cure all ills at any price, particularly with the aid of technological solutions and innovations. There is a need to restore an awareness of the limited nature both of resources (human, financial and environmental) and of the capacity to cure, particularly in view of the vicious circle in which Western societies find themselves: more and more health problems are linked to the (natural or socioeconomic) environment, while at the same time, in order to provide care, the health system requires increasing amounts of raw materials and energy, thus significantly affecting the functioning of ecosystems.

5. Promoting alternative care approaches and considering environmental questions in medical practice

“More is not always better.” Adopting non-pharmacological – e.g. behavioural – approaches to disease management can offer real benefits for patients. In addition, new (especially interprofessional or financial) care models should be strongly promoted. This would enable patient trajectories to be reshaped in a more efficient and consistent manner, while also helping to refocus care and medicine on more effectively addressing the complexity of individual needs in a particular context.

6. Promoting sustainability efforts at healthcare facilities

As part of their commitment to public health, healthcare facilities have a responsibility to endeavour to reduce their environmental footprint. These facilities have a duty to serve as an example to other sectors, particularly since – as employers and property owners – they are important actors in the local economy. As the purpose of such facilities and of the health system is to promote public health, taking environmental issues into account in their operations will contribute to the attainment of this objective.

7. Training and raising awareness of environmental sustainability issues among health professionals

At present, no training is provided for health professionals on questions of environmental sustainability or the sustainability of health services. In order to involve everyone concerned, new courses meeting these requirements should be created, not only for those already employed in the health system (continuing education and training) but also for those undergoing basic training.

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