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Fair Pathways to Net-Zero Healthcare

Summary

In this crucial decade for climate action, the health sector must play its part in reducing emissions.

It is now clear that the health sector is not only at risk from climate change but also a major polluter of greenhouse gases, responsible for 5.2% of global emissions. With time rapidly running out to limit global temperature rise in line with the Paris Agreement (1.5 - 2°C) it is now widely understood that every sector, everywhere, needs to do its part; healthcare is no exception. Efforts are well underway, led by WHO under the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health (ATACH).

At present, countries that score high on the social measures of human well-being underpinning the Sustainable Development Goals also breach more

critical earth support systems. This is unsustainable at a global scale. To date, 58 countries (from across all world regions and income groups) have committed to developing a sustainable low-carbon health system. While net-zero healthcare is a shared target, the challenges vary.

In this article, the authors outline the principles of fair pathways to net-zero healthcare that are attentive to health and socioeconomic inequalities, both within and between countries. They explore this idea through the concept of a 'Green UHC' (Green Universal Health Coverage), a cornerstone of the Sustainable Development Goals.

To address the practical challenges facing policy makers, the authors discuss how to navigate the potential trade-offs on the pathway to net-zero healthcare.

BERGEN CENTRE FOR ETHICS AND PRIORITY SETTING (BCEPS)

is an inter-disciplinary research centre that aims to understand and promote ethically fair and efficient priority setting in national health systems.

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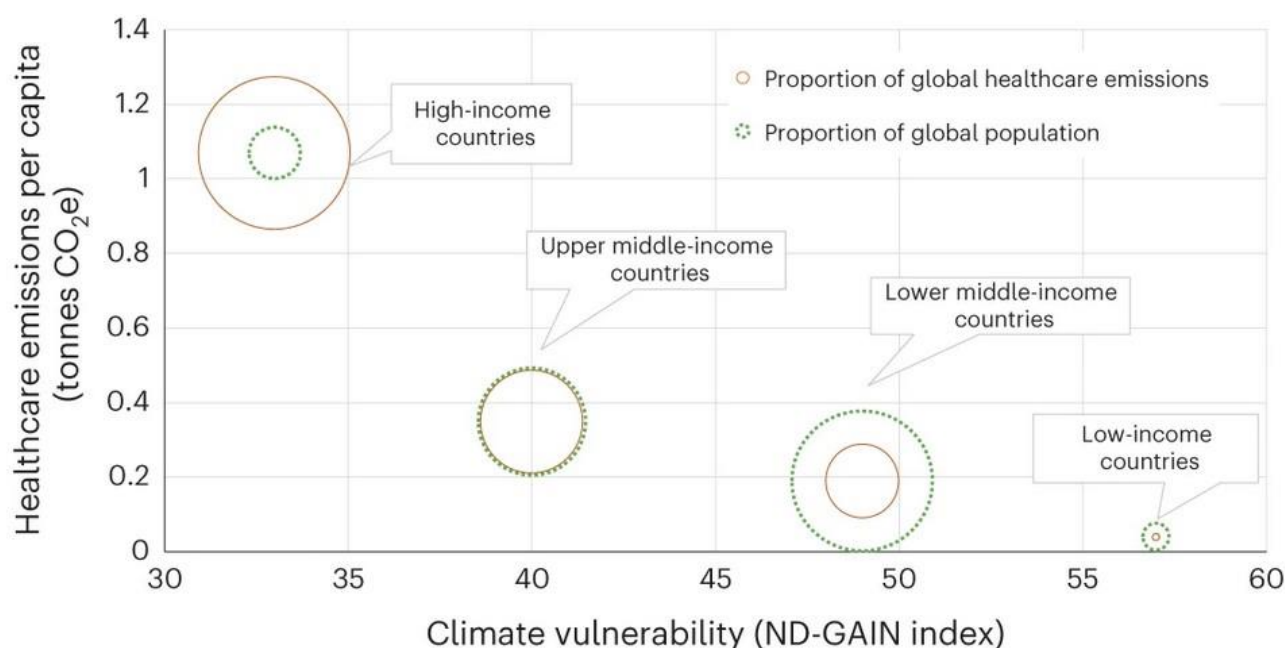
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LINKED ARTICLE

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Key findings



The figure shows that countries with lower healthcare carbon footprints are more highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. The width of the circles reflects income-group differences in the proportion of global healthcare emissions (orange) and global population (green).

Priority setting and net-zero healthcare

For countries, businesses and sectors (including healthcare), carbon budgets — the cumulative carbon emissions corresponding to a given temperature rise — have been a useful concept to guide and inspire climate action. We extend this approach to net-zero healthcare using the priority-setting framework to assist health policy makers in navigating this critical challenge.

Aligning policy priorities to support investments in low-carbon healthcare remains especially important for health policy makers in low-income and middle-income countries, which often still have pervasive unmet basic healthcare needs and underdeveloped healthcare systems. Further work to define a 'Green UHC' and integrate the sustainability and UHC agendas is urgently needed.

Policy implications/recommendations

- The movement to decarbonize healthcare presents new challenges for improving health within planetary limits.
- Wealthy countries accelerate decarbonization efforts to avoid encroaching on the fair share of other countries.
- Curbing emissions in middle-income countries while delivering the UHC agenda will be central to achieving net-zero healthcare globally.
- Achieving a 'Green UHC' requires closer alignment of national and international healthcare financing with the climate policy agenda.
- Accelerating the zero carbon healthcare agenda has the potential to not only reduce healthcare's climate impact, but also help inspire the societal actions needed to meet the Paris Agreement.