

Competence development on climate adaptation and healthy ageing: gaps in educational offers for health and social care professionals

Context to the study

- Older adults with already vulnerable health statuses are disproportionately at risk from climate change.
- Climate change solutions and public health or healthy ageing interventions have so far rarely joined forces.
- Education and training offers for health and social care professionals do not focus on the climate-health-ageing nexus.

Summary of findings

- Health and social care professionals urgently need climate-health-ageing specific education and training.
- Profession specific competence frameworks and/or guidelines on climate change-health-ageing need to be developed in all EU countries.
- Educators as well as so-called “champions” need to be trained on the climate-health-ageing nexus to implement the urgently needed change both within educational institutions as well as health and social care organizations.

Introduction

We are witnessing human-induced changes in the climate system on an unprecedented scale¹. Along with the unfolding climate crisis, increased longevity and reduced fertility rates have led to an increasingly aged European population where, unfortunately, extensions in lifespan are not always mirrored by greater health-spans. This increases the extent of climate-related health risks, as older adults with already vulnerable health statuses are disproportionately at risk from climate change through many mechanisms². Surprisingly, to date, climate change solutions have rarely joined forces with public health or healthy ageing interventions. Climate change is hardly addressed in health or active ageing strategic policy papers^{3,4}. Furthermore, reference to the specific needs and active inclusion of older citizens to help transform today's societies to become “climate-resilient and age-friendly” is missing. To ensure older people's “climate” empowerment, general awareness but also specific knowledge related to climate change, climate mitigation, adaptation and resilience is urgently needed, both among older persons themselves and those working directly with them.

Summary of Research

To evaluate the current state of education and further training of health and social care professionals in climate-health-ageing, a European Alliance of higher education (HEI), vocational education and training (VET) as well as health and social care (HSC) institutions performed a needs analysis in 2022 which included a) an analysis of existing educational offers on climate change, health and ageing; b) a literature review on the climate-health-ageing nexus; c) an online survey among educators and HSC worker, and d) focus group interviews in HSC institutions.

Research Findings

The needs analysis revealed that:

1. International scientific literature focussing on competence development within the climate-health-nexus is dominated by English-speaking countries; though vulnerable groups are mentioned in some of the studies, a specific focus on the ageing population is almost non-existent.
2. Educational offers on climate change and health listed in the Planetary Health Alliance's education resource database are lacking specific mentioning on the intersect between climate-health-ageing.
3. HSC organizations increasingly have environmental and energy strategies and activities in place (climate mitigation); however, apart from crisis management, climate adaptation strategies and strategies/guidelines supporting and/or protecting climate vulnerable groups still seem to be almost non-existent.
4. With regard to healthy ageing, only a minority of HSC professionals (survey conducted in five EU countries) reported that specific climate change practices exist in their own institution with most of them indicating a need for re-/up-skilling on the challenges posed by the climate crises and population ageing.
5. Educators perceive the main reasons for the exclusion of climate change from health and social care curricula as a) lack of awareness among educators that climate change impacts health, b) overcrowded curricula of HSC professions, c) the novelty of the topic and d) lack of an institutional reference framework/guideline. They also stated that the integration of climate change in teaching lags behind the demands of the practical field.

Conclusions

HSC professionals urgently need climate-specific training to be able to support the transition to a climate-resilient Europe. Though aware of climate crises and the increasingly severe impact on health, they lack concrete knowledge and competences to adjust their work practices and to support those most vulnerable in adapting to new realities and developing resilience skills. The existing education gap regarding the integration of climate-induced health implications in the (further) training of HSC professionals is identified by experts in the literature and by HSC workers, VET and HEI. However, the need for special in-depth education on (active) ageing, health and climate change is only voiced by those who work directly with this growing population group, who have already been confronted first hand with their climate vulnerability and the subsequent need for resilience and adaptation strategies.

Policy Recommendations

In its 2021 open letter, the *WHO Civil Society Working Group to Advance Action on Climate Change and Health* already called on all universities and educational stakeholders to strengthen climate change education for all health professionals⁵. Considering the increasingly aged European population, this call needs to be expanded to include a specific focus on (healthy and active) ageing in the education and further training of health and social care professionals in all EU countries.

- 1) First Point:** Structural barriers within the educational sector and the HSCO need to be addressed, as the existing curricula and working conditions of HSC professionals do not leave space to tackle yet another “heavy issue” such as climate change. This cannot be done by the HSC organizations and educational institutions alone, but needs the support at political level.
- 2) Second Point:** For HSC workers, education that is specific to the target groups’ needs must be implemented. These include small, bite-sized training units focussing on easy implementation of concrete measures, as well as more intensive programmes for selected “champions” with a high motivation and the opportunity to make changes.
- 3) Third Point:** For those working in the education sector, institutional and/or professional association-specific guidelines seem to be urgently needed to ensure the realignment of curricula content and to obtain time and financial resources for personal up-skilling in climate adaptation and related topics.

References

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