WHO Framework for Climate-Resilient and Environmentally Sustainable Health Care Facilities — An Assessment Tool

Introduction

In 2019, the 72nd WHA approved a Global Strategy on Health, Environment and Climate Change, a broad strategy covering all aspects of health and environment with important emphasis on climate change, and responding to health risks and challenges up to 2030. The Strategy has 12 Goals to be achieved, under the broad headings of: People and better health and well-being; Universal health coverage; Air pollution; Climate change; Water sanitation and hygiene; Chemical safety; Radiation safety; Health care settings; Workplaces; Global and regional settings; Emergencies; and Governance. Under health care settings, the Strategy identifies as its goal that “all health care facilities and services are environmentally sustainable: using safely managed water and sanitation services and clean energy; sustainably managing their waste and procuring goods in a sustainable manner; are resilient to extreme weather events; and capable of protecting the health, safety and security of the health workforce”. Moreover, achieving all the other Goals will have an impact on improving the performance of the health system and of health care facilities in particular.

Why focus on health care facilities

Health care facilities are setting which provide direct health treatment procedures for patients and vary in size from small health care clinics to large hospitals. In many countries and settings, health care facilities are vulnerable to climate change and other environmental stresses. They often lack a proper infrastructure, a sufficient health workforce, and suffer from inadequate water and sanitation services, and energy supply. These four areas also impacted negatively by climate related shocks and stresses. In their functioning, health care facilities can also have a negative impact on health and the environment, through emissions of greenhouse gases, which contribute to climate change, and through discharges of insufficiently treated wastes, of different kinds, to the environment.

It is therefore the aim of this work to assist health care facilities identify and implement interventions that provide protection from external climate-related shocks (build climate-resilience), and that protect the health workforce and their serving communities from environmental threats (see figure).
Increasing Health Care Facilities Resilience

Climate threats to health systems are particularly visible when it comes to health care facilities. Often, health care facilities are not built to cope with increasing climate-related risks, such as extreme climate events including storms, floods and droughts; extreme temperatures, fires, sea-level rise; and changed patterns of climate sensitive diseases. Although it is recognized that health care facilities, through their operations, are an important source of greenhouse gases, and therefore contributing to climate change, often smaller facilities in less developed countries do not contribute to the problem. And yet, they are the ones most likely to be affected, directly or indirectly, by climate change impacts. It is therefore key to build climate-resilience, to address the main four environmental fundamentals to deliver safe and quality care: A well informed health workforce, adequate access to WASH (and wastes) services, minimum standards for energy, and a strategically located, and solid health infrastructure. Interventions to build resilience may include risk assessments (hazards, vulnerabilities and exposures), training and capacity building in the health workforce, awareness and communication, service delivery, and funding.

Addressing environmental sustainability

Health care facilities, when not well managed, produce adverse environmental impacts, affecting the very same people it aims to protect. A minimum requirement for safe and quality care are access to reliable sources of water and energy, and yet, many health care facilities lack even these basic resources. Environmental sustainability, from this perspective, means implementing interventions that optimize the consumption of resources (e.g. water, energy, food), and reduces emissions of greenhouse gases, and discharges of wastes (including biological, chemical and radiological). It also includes procuring goods and services that follow the principles of environmental sustainability.

In less developed settings, health care facilities may be unable to implement all required actions for resilience and environmental sustainability. The framework proposes minimum standards that all health care facilities must have, followed by an incremental approach for interventions depending on each facility’s feasibility, capacity and resources. Building climate-resilience and environmental sustainability are best addressed together, thus achieving synergies and resource efficiency.

Climate-resilient and environmentally sustainable health care facilities – are facilities that are capable to anticipate, respond to, cope with, recover from and adapt to climate-related shocks and stress, so as to bring ongoing and sustained health care to their target populations, despite an unstable climate, with access to minimum standards of WASH (and wastes) and energy services, an informed health workforce, and solid infrastructure, and which protects its environment for the benefit of its workers, patients and surrounding communities.

Next steps

The Framework report will be completed in May 2020, including detailed checklists for health care facilities to monitor and assess their climate resilience and their environmental sustainability. These checklists will be tested in countries between May and July, before producing a final report.

Contact

For more information please contact:

Media: Arthur Wynnswynsa@who.int
Technical Unit: Elena Villalobos Prats
(villalobose@who.int)