

Episode: *Author Interview: “How Should We Respond to Health Care Generating Environmental Harm?”*

Guest: Amy Collins, MD

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Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the *Author Interview series* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative format for accessing the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Dr Amy Collins, an emergency physician and sustainable health care professional who serves as the Medical Director for Physician Engagement and Education at Health Care Without Harm, where she leads its physician network. She's here to discuss her article, coauthored with Dr Shanda Demorest, *How Should We Respond to Health Care Generating Environmental Harm?*, in the October 2022 issue of the Journal, [Health Care Waste](#). Dr Collins, thank you so much for being on the podcast with me. [music fades]

DR AMY COLLINS: Thank you so much for having me.

HOFF: So, what's the main ethics point of your article?

COLLINS: Well, thank you for asking that. The health care sector has a very large environmental footprint, and we know that health care operations contribute to both environmental degradation and public health harms. And this presents an irony and is in conflict with the oath to do no harm, and health care's healing mission and my mission to protect health. The greatest irony of all is that the health care sector makes a significant contribution to the climate crisis. The US health care sector is responsible for 8.5 percent of US greenhouse gas emissions and 27 percent of the global health care climate footprint, with the indirect public health harms on the same order of magnitude as medical errors. And given that climate change is considered among the greatest public health threats of the century, in this article, we argue that health professionals have an ethical obligation to lead action to reduce health care's contribution to this crisis, to protect health now and in the future.

As health professionals, we are committed to making sure that we don't cause patient harm as we care for patients, but we also argue that health professionals have an opportunity and obligation to make sure that our health care operations, including our clinical care, don't contribute to environmental degradation and the climate crisis and ultimately to the diseases that we treat. We have this great opportunity to align operations and our clinical choices with health care's mission. So, we argue that health professionals have an ethical obligation to start looking at health care choices through a climate lens.

HOFF: And so, what do you see as the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from this article?

COLLINS: Yeah, I really love this question. So, we know that health professional students want to be prepared to care for patients in the climate crisis. We know that they want

climate health education integrated into their curriculum. What I want students to know is that they are more powerful than they realize, and they can create movements and lead change. My advice to any students who have read this article who are interested in climate-smart health care and taking action to reduce the environmental impact of health care delivery is to, first of all, get educated. Connect with the health care sustainability community. When you're doing your rotations or are in clinics, look around for impacts and opportunities. Once you start seeing them, you won't stop seeing them. Evaluate your clinical practice. Start to apply a climate lens to your clinical choices. If you have a choice between a reusable and a single-use disposable device, consider using the reusable device, which likely has less of an impact. Talk about climate and climate-smart health care with your professors and teachers and colleagues. I think also, I would advise you to advocate for climate and health education in your curriculum, specifically content about the climate impact of health care and opportunities to reduce that impact. And finally, start thinking about how you might want to integrate this work into your future career.

HOFF: And finally, if you could add a point to this article that you didn't have the time or space to fully explore, what would that be?

COLLINS: [chuckles] I think there would be several things.

HOFF: [chuckles] Sure.

COLLINS: But I think the important point I would like to make now is that we know that in order to meet the goals of the Paris Agreement and avoid the most catastrophic consequences of climate change, all sectors are going to need to reduce emissions by 50 percent by 2030 and achieve net zero emissions by 2050. We know that if we continue on a business-as-usual path, health care emissions are going to triple. And if we are going to meet this goal, it is going to take action from every health professional from every health institution around the world. The point I want to make is that I want health professionals to know that we have the tools, resources, know how, and strategies to at least halve emissions by 2030. What is lacking is the awareness and will. I want health professionals to know that they are trusted. Historically, health professionals have been very powerful public health advocates, and I think now is the time for health professionals to elevate climate action to the most important public health advocacy opportunity of our time and start by leading action to clean up our hospitals and clinics and take action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. [theme music returns]

HOFF: Dr Collins, thank you so much for your time on the podcast and for your and your coauthor's contribution to the Journal this month.

COLLINS: Thank you so much for having me and for your interest in this article.

HOFF: To read the full article, as well as the rest of the October 2022 issue for free, visit our site, [JournalofEthics.org](https://www.journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.