

# Sustainability in physiotherapy



**AISLING CONDON** BSc MCSP

Director of Physiotherapy, The Green Physio

As with so many other businesses, too many physiotherapy practices are missing considerations about ethical responsibility for anything beyond our individual actions. We all have a responsibility to find ways in which we can protect our planet beyond the individual, and this article asks the question; can we do more?

## LEARNING OUTCOMES

### TO SUPPORT PHYSIO FIRST QAP

- 1 Understand the environmental concerns on the impact of healthcare services.
- 2 Identify carbon hotspots within our own lifestyles and clinical practice.
- 3 Consider the steps we can take as individuals in our practices towards sustainability.
- 4 Be aware of the potential benefits to our businesses of working towards a greener practice.

## Healthcare and the environment

Environmental degradation is not only detrimental to animals and plants, it is hugely harmful to humans and our health. Climate change poses a major global threat. Research published by the World Health Organisation (WHO) has found that 99% of people breathe unhealthy air resulting from the burning of fossil fuels, and, in the UK alone, air pollution is the cause of 1 in 20 deaths (Clugston 2021).

The UK healthcare system is responsible for 4-5% of our national total carbon footprint, making it our largest public sector contributor to the problem.

Greenhouse gas emissions produced by our healthcare sector are generated by a range of activities including:

- travel by staff and patients
- the energy used to heat and light hospitals and GP surgeries, etc
- the resources necessary to diagnose illnesses

- the manufacture and distribution of drugs and other physical treatments
- the waste generated by healthcare processes and providers.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the activities of a healthcare system significantly impact and put pressure on the environment (World Health Organisation 2017), and this places a responsibility on all those involved in our healthcare institutions to recognise, and act on, the emissions they cause if we are to make the necessary changes to our own world to ensure life as we know it continues on our planet.

The WHO defines a sustainable healthcare system as one that “improves, maintains or restores health, whilst minimising negative impacts on the environment, and leveraging opportunities to restore and improve it, to the benefit of the health and wellbeing of current and future populations” (World Health Organisation 2017). As healthcare professionals, our training has equipped us with the skills needed to prevent ill health, diagnose conditions, provide treatment and care for the sick and injured, and many achieve successful outcomes, whilst at the same time using the finite resources available

within their clinics wisely and carefully. In addition, the very fact that we are health professionals dictates that we have a duty to protect and preserve the health and wellbeing of our communities.

In the bigger picture, we can apply these parameters to climate crisis and recognise that we cannot afford to be wasteful with our planet’s resources and that it is our duty to mitigate our impact on the environment in order to prevent ill health. One of the ways we achieve this is to become carbon literate.

## What is carbon literacy?

Carbon literacy is defined as the “awareness of the carbon costs and impacts of everyday activities and the ability and motivation to reduce emissions, on an individual, community and organisational basis” (Carbon Literacy Project 2023). In order to become carbon literate, we need to understand the scale of the problem, and be empowered to take action on climate change as well as support others to do so, whether through initiatives in the workplace, in the local community, or by engaging in campaigns, petitions and protests. One of the first steps we can take towards carbon literacy is to consider how we can run our practices in a sustainable way by understanding

“IT IS OUR DUTY TO MITIGATE OUR IMPACT ON THE ENVIRONMENT IN ORDER TO PREVENT ILL HEALTH WITHIN OUR COMMUNITIES”

how we use the resources available to us, making the most of what we have, being aware of the impact of our actions, both individually and within the healthcare system, and then acting to move towards a low-carbon culture.

Practising sustainable healthcare can require a shift in our mindset and behaviour, and an awareness of the impacts our profession has on the environment. However, once we take this initial step towards carbon literacy, it will enable us as clinicians, and business owners, to be better prepared for, mitigate, and adapt to the anticipated weather, health and environmental events that are forecast.

## Carbon literacy and physiotherapy

As physiotherapists, we can incorporate carbon literacy into our practices on a day-to-day basis, whether in the conscious decisions we make such as turning off lights and equipment that is not in use, recycling our waste, how we travel to and from work, and the discussions we have with our peers and patients. Everything we do, particularly in terms of “lifestyle medicine” is related to the environment at such a fundamental, physiological and anatomical level that, if we don’t consider how we impact it, we are ignoring a big piece of the puzzle and we are at risk of undoing all the great work that we achieve with our patients.

We might consider that physiotherapy is already a “green profession”, and it is true that compared to other health professions and areas of healthcare, physiotherapy is comparatively green. We offer a low-tech, hands-on, and interpersonal approach to healthcare, we increase mobility and fitness through injury rehabilitation, therefore enabling active participation in social life and the natural environment, and we facilitate and encourage the use of active transport, such as walking and cycling. We also reduce the need for medication and resource intensive healthcare, such as surgery.

“PHYSIOTHERAPY IS A COMPARATIVELY GREEN HEALTH PROFESSION, BUT THERE IS ALWAYS MORE TO BE DONE TO REDUCE OUR IMPACT ON THE PLANET”

There is, however, always more that can be done to reduce our impact and realise our potential to be a low-carbon service. Many of us in physiotherapy are already making changes to reduce our carbon footprint, both personally and professionally. It is, therefore, useful in deciding how we should change our habits and practices, to know what are our biggest carbon “hotspots”, i.e. the areas in our profession that are the most carbon-intensive:

- Energy use; lighting and heating our clinics
- Travel; how staff, patients and our suppliers access our clinic locations
- Professional services; related to the businesses and services we use, such as phones, computers, general IT support, finance, accountancy, payroll, insurance, etc
- Waste; related to our business and clinical practices, and including over-ordering stock
- Procurement; what, how and from whom we purchase our supplies and consumables.

If we review each of these areas, we can establish a breakdown of our carbon footprint and identify the changes we can make. I always encourage the easy wins first, for example using the energy-saving modes on computer monitors, turning off equipment when it is not in use, switching to recycled paper or, preferably, going paperless, and substituting the standard Theraband to the sustainable and re-usable options that are available instead.

The bigger changes to work towards include switching to a green energy supplier, performing staff travel audits to identify whether car sharing might be an option, looking into business grants to install bike racks and electric car chargers outside the clinic, and only purchasing goods or services from more environmentally conscious companies.

Across the country there are many examples, whether at an individual, group, or organisational level, of physios and other allied health professionals who have made changes to the way they practise to improve their environmental sustainability and reduce their carbon footprint.

## Case study: Ocean Physio & Rehab

The team at Ocean Physio & Rehab in Devon (<https://oceanphysio.com>) started, as a physiotherapy practice, to make their sustainable journey in 2021. Their desire to make environmentally conscious changes led them to supply ethically sourced exercise and rehab equipment. Whilst the clinic had always recycled some of their waste, they had reached a point where they felt they needed guidance on the steps required to make bigger changes in terms of reducing the clinic’s carbon footprint.

In October 2022, Andy Larmour from Ocean Physio & Rehab attended my carbon literacy course for physiotherapists and pledged, on an individual level, to reduce his vehicle use through a combination of working from home and cycling to work. He also pledged a group action to change the clinic’s entire procurement system to use suppliers, such as MoveWell ([www.movewelluk.com](http://www.movewelluk.com)), who were either carbon neutral or environmentally conscious.

Less than two months later, the clinic was using only recycled paper for everything including couch roll, and they had invested significantly in using only sustainable products, such as resistance bands and floor mats made from recycled material, and cork blocks and rollers for their exercise classes. This, incidentally, resulted in an increase in sales as people used the products ➔

in classes and then bought them to use at home. Another action that was in keeping with sustainable values was to buy items only when they needed replacing, including staff uniforms that would be exchanged with sustainable alternatives when required. Andy says: “We see these pledges as just the start of our journey towards net zero and are determined to achieve this.” He believes that the number of people he and his team have engaged with about these changes is in the hundreds, and that everyone they have spoken with so far have agreed that this is a positive move.

Through their commitment to Andy’s action pledges, and becoming carbon literate, Ocean Physio & Rehab has reduced its carbon footprint and gained the tools with which to talk about the climate crisis and about what everyone can do to reduce our impact on the environment.

## The benefits of being carbon literate

As the Ocean Physio & Rehab case study demonstrates, having an understanding of carbon literacy in our profession can also have massive benefits for our clinics, not only in terms of monetary and carbon savings, but also in the respect and admiration that we can win individually and for our clinics. Being certified as carbon literate is a great accolade that demonstrates an active commitment to climate action, and therefore to protecting and preserving the health and wellbeing of the local community and beyond, both now and in the future.

Research has also shown that environmentally sustainable businesses have a better chance of retaining staff (Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment 2019). Individuals with an environmental conscience bring that mindset with them to the workplace and

their preferences for green innovation drive their emotional state. When an employer’s values aligns with theirs, it has a positive effect on the individual’s intentions to stay.

The Centre for Sustainable Healthcare website ([www.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk](http://www.sustainablehealthcare.org.uk)) has many examples and stories about how individuals and businesses have made changes to improve sustainability. Through the delivery of carbon literacy training, I have the pleasure of reading the individual and group pledges that every participant makes to reduce carbon emissions to gain their carbon literacy certificate. Pledges have ranged from the individual level of changing eating habits to a more plant-based diet and greater engagement in active transport and driving less, to the group / organisational level of changing electronic communications and information storage policy and procedures in the workplace, promoting virtual physio services, and establishing a walking aid re-use and recycle scheme.

## Become carbon literate today

Here are eight actions you can start today that will help towards becoming a carbon literate clinic:

- Recognise the environmental impacts of how we deliver healthcare, and our impact both individually and professionally to climate crisis. Upskill yourself and your team so your practice becomes an invaluable asset in the successful implementation of sustainable initiatives.
- Create a “green team” to calculate your carbon baseline; measure and monitor energy, equipment and resource use, and waste generation that will enable targets to be set, and will show transparency, and achieve positive and workable actions. The green team will also provide a clear channel of communication at all levels within

your clinic, whilst acting as a platform that enables innovation to thrive.

- Change to greener suppliers, e.g. energy, IT, accountant / finance, exercise equipment, clinic equipment and consumables etc.
- Incentivise behaviour change with all of your stakeholders, e.g. where possible, encourage your team and your patients to leave their cars and travel more actively to work and appointments.
- Work towards a clinic green action plan.
- Join or support a social movement or campaign that focuses on environmental activities and / or gets everyone talking about climate action.
- Declare a “climate emergency” for your clinic.
- Go public; inform your patients, neighbouring practices and other local businesses of your philosophy and policies, and use your influence as healthcare professionals to prompt a discussion on the urgency for everyone to understand the need for carbon literacy.

## Conclusion

I recently came across this quote on Twitter: “Climate is a team sport”. It is not only a statement that I fully agree with, but is also highly appropriate for our profession. In our own efforts towards net zero, we can all act and make changes individually, but it is only when we act together that impactful and significant change will happen. And if COVID-19 has taught us anything, it has proved that our healthcare system can respond at pace and at scale to major changes and challenges when necessary.

If we begin by knowing our own personal and professional carbon hotspots, we can then identify ways to join the many others who are pledging to reduce their overall environmental impact and lower their carbon footprints, whilst continuing to improve outcomes for our patients and securing the health and future of our families.

For those who already engage in the need for carbon literacy, it can sometimes feel a lonely place to

“BECOMING CARBON LITERATE CAN RESULT IN FINANCIAL AND SOCIAL BENEFITS FOR OUR BUSINESSES”



be, especially within the working environment. The important thing to remember, however, is that we are not alone. I guarantee that there are many others who feel the same about the need to “do something” to tackle climate change, but have no idea where to start. Therefore, the important first step is to talk about it; raise a wider awareness by discussing the positive changes that you have made towards sustainability, share your experiences with family, friends, patients and colleagues. Keeping it personal and relatable is often the best way in which to find allies and start to generate action.

### About the author

Aisling Condon is a specialist musculoskeletal physiotherapist from the south west and a certified Carbon Literacy Trainer. Aisling grew up in the countryside and so, from an early age, had an appreciation for nature and the outdoors. Like many physios, she has always been a keen sportsperson. Two


of her favourite pastimes are surfing and snowboarding, both of which lend themselves to an increased awareness and understanding of the natural world, and she believes are what first called on her innate instinct to respect it and protect it, and to encourage others to do the same. Consequently, alongside her physiotherapy work, Aisling’s passion for protecting the environment and helping to act against the climate crisis led her to pursue specialist training, which she did through the Carbon Literacy Project ([www.carbonliteracy.com](http://www.carbonliteracy.com)) and SEE Sustainability ([www.seesustainability.co.uk](http://www.seesustainability.co.uk)) under Dr Matt Sawyer. Since then, Aisling has trained physiotherapists and healthcare professionals alike on how to become carbon literate, and take this new set of skills forward into their personal and working lives. To find out more about becoming carbon literate, about what the course involves and about how you can sign up, please visit <https://thegreenphysio.com/sustainability>.

### References

Carbon Literacy Project. 2023; [www.carbonliteracy.com](http://www.carbonliteracy.com)

Clugston H. One in 20 deaths in England caused by air pollution – these are the areas worst affected by dirty air. *National World* 2021; <https://www.nationalworld.com/health/one-in-20-deaths-in-england-caused-by-air-pollution-the-areas-worst-affected-3277441>

Institute of Environmental Management and Assessment. Sustainability key to attracting and retaining workers, study finds. 2019; <https://www.iema.net/articles/sustainability-key-to-attracting-and-retaining-workers-study-finds>

World Health Organisation. Regional Office for Europe. Environmentally sustainable health systems: a strategic document 2017. <https://apps.who.int/iris/handle/10665/340375> 



**ENRAF NONIUS**

**Compact II**  
High Energy Inductive  
Magnetic Therapy  
**ONLY £14,500 + VAT**

**PHOENIX HEALTHCARE**

**Endolaser 120**  
High Performance 3B Therapeutic Laser  
and a 100mW super pulsed laser probe  
**ONLY £2,160 + VAT**

**Tecarpuls II**  
Capacitive and Resistive  
**SUPERB PRICE**  
**ONLY £6,450 + VAT**

0115 965 6634 [www.phoenix-healthcare.co.uk](http://www.phoenix-healthcare.co.uk)  
[info@phoenix-healthcare.co.uk](mailto:info@phoenix-healthcare.co.uk)