

Planetary health leadership: the journey so far. [Editorial]

YASSAIE, Rammina <<http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6756-8678>>, HOLMES, Samantha <<http://orcid.org/0009-0000-4678-4072>> and GARMAN, Andrew N

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Planetary Health Leadership: The journey so far

Authors: Rammina Yassaie¹, Samantha Holmes², Andrew N Garman³

1 School of Health and Social Care, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, UK R.Yassaie@shu.ac.uk

2 Sustainable Healthcare Coalition, UK holmes.samantha@gmail.com

3 Rush University, Chicago, Illinois, USA Andy_N_Garman@rush.edu

In September 2024, *BMJ Leader* published an editorial which laid out a call for papers, and within that a call to action; to strengthen our collective understanding of the importance of planetary health leadership.(1) Our intention was to offer readers a compendium of evidence-based insights into what it really means to lead with people *and* planet in mind. Journal editors hold immense privilege and with that comes a responsibility to lead by example, so we also pledged to strengthen the journal's own commitment to this topic.

Since then, seven of the nine known planetary boundaries have worsened, with these boundaries acting as the Earth's vital signs, indicating whether the planet remains a safe and resilient home for humanity. (2) In 2025, the boundary of ocean acidification was breached for the first time; the effects of which are far reaching as coral reefs are an essential habitat for marine species and vital for food security. Other boundaries including climate change, biosphere integrity, land system change, freshwater use, biogeochemical flows and novel entities also, sadly, showed worsening trends. In turn, it has never been more urgent to consider planetary health as an integral part of healthcare delivery and to highlight the need for more health voices to advocate for meaningful change.

Despite this gloomy backdrop, reasons to be hopeful remain. Human health is increasingly being considered in policy-making discussions about sustainability, and there has been notable growth in Google searches for 'health and climate change', demonstrating growing interest in the subject.(3) In 2025, students role-modelled effective leadership with more than 188 health professional schools across 21 countries completing planetary health report cards on their institutions(4), setting yet another record, and a new report card specific to healthcare management programmes was also launched(5). In October, the Alliance for Transformative Action on Climate and Health

welcomed its 100th country, Tuvalu, into its roster of areas committed to taking climate action for health.(6) Crucially, healthcare greenhouse emissions fell by 16% in 2022 (the last year for which statistics are available)(3) and more broadly, in the first half of 2025, for the first time in human history, renewable energy is now generating more electricity globally than coal.(7) All of this, along with the papers in our topic collection, show that positive changes are happening.

Within this Topic Collection, *BMJ Leader* is proud to present 18 initial contributions to the dialogue and scholarship on Planetary Health Leadership within healthcare, representing voices from many countries, professional backgrounds, and types of leadership. Such diversity of thought and perspective is essential to make meaningful progress in this space; with many of our contributors demonstrating that planetary health leadership is a collective endeavour and not an individual's heroic tale.(8,9,10)

For readers new to the topic, we recommend starting with the Learning Zone piece on planetary health leadership(11), as well as our original editorial. These will provide a grounding to the “why” and “what” of healthcare leadership in planetary health.

From there, the collection includes contributions that should appeal to a wide range of audiences and interests, whilst offering insight into how we can all play our part.

For example, Qian et al (12) and Shearer et al (13) outline how healthcare providers can shift towards net zero, whilst others diagnose the leadership challenges that still need to be addressed (14)(15). The interprofessional nature of the work is also emphasised; with papers spotlighting the leadership required across pharmaceuticals(16), allied health(13) and primary care(17). Eriksen et al(18) make the case to move beyond net zero, and towards also restoring and protecting nature. Likewise, others remind us that reducing emissions will only go so far and call urgently for leadership that centres resilience planning and adaptation for the locked-in planetary impacts.(19)

Meanwhile, Walpole outlines how existing leadership standards could be utilised to put planetary health into practice, showing that we may already have some of the tools we need.(20) Yet, Metzendorf et al rightly call on guideline developers to urgently and more meaningfully integrate planetary health considerations, so that practitioners can make choices that care for both people and planet.(21) Montgomery et al go further offering a

much-needed outline of all the actions health workers can take to protect health; stretching from personal through to policy.(22) Others compellingly challenge entrenched power dynamics and the lack of inclusive representation in governance processes(10)(22), encouraging readers to examine the Euro-centric or global north paradigms that can often dominate our thinking.

Inspiring success stories can also be seen with the role of students and educators in driving the integration of planetary health in education(4)(24); highlighting the importance of grassroots leadership in shaping education that is fit for the future.

It's also important to appreciate that leadership is more than just 'doing'; it encompasses a way of 'being'; including hearing from those with lived experience of leading for planetary health, so that we can explore the leadership values, behaviours and characteristics required.(8,9)

In our earlier editorial, we shared our hope that this topic collection would spotlight both the progress achieved and the important work that still lays ahead. Planetary health leadership remains a nascent field, and fertile ground for additional work in a wide variety of areas. Going forward, we will be particularly interested in submissions that strengthen the evidence base for existing solutions and help guide how we can amplify our advocacy to drive meaningful change. We will also remain committed to platforming voices from groups most affected by the planetary crisis, along with leadership perspectives from communities and service-users themselves. Cross-sectoral insights are another area of great need, along with deeper study into the elements of planetary health leadership that go beyond climate change. We're also eager to explore the role of digital solutions, while appreciating the environmental risks inherent in rapid and unchecked technological growth. We will also want to continue recognising the power imbalances that often shape this work and welcome reflections on what effective, accountable leadership looks like – especially in confronting dominant institutions that, sadly, continue to sidestep their responsibilities in advancing planetary health.(3)

BMJ Leader remains a place for scholarship, learning, insight, and debate – dedicated to equipping people with the knowledge they need to lead effectively in and across health and care settings. As we introduce this selection of papers in our planetary health topic

collection, we urge our community of readers, educators, researchers and leaders to read, share, write – and most importantly, to act on the insights offered here. Health voices are trusted voices and with that trust comes responsibility. Future generations will look back on this moment and ask our generation of leaders – “*what did you do?*”

What do we want our answer to be?

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