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Climate change among health students in France: a multicenter, cross-sectional study

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Introduction: Climate change (CC) has been identified as the greatest global health threat of our time. To foster the resilience of our health system and promote sustainable health, it is essential to rely on aware and trained actors. We evaluated the level of awareness, perception, and commitment of health students in France about CC and sustainable development (SD) issues. We also assessed their expectations in terms of initial training on these subjects.

Methods: We conducted an observational, cross-sectional, multi-centre study targeting students enrolled in Medicine, Pharmacy, Odontology, Maieutics, Nursing, Physiotherapy, and Medical Electroradiology in the southwest region of France. The questionnaire used was designed to identify the Knowledge, Behaviors, Practices, and expectations on SD and CC during their studies. It was distributed in a format to be completed online in April 2022.

Results: A total of 529/7000 (7.5%) health students participated in our survey. Our results show that students have little perception of the impact of the health system on CC. However, they are already committed to reducing energy (97%) and water consumption (94.5%) and sorting their waste (87.8%) in their daily lives. Among students, 73.6% envision themselves as future actors in sustainable healthcare. Although they expect a strong commitment from their training institution, 92% of them think that students are the most active on these issues. Regarding their training, 83% of them think that it should integrate CC and SD issues, while 58.7% say that they have never dealt with this topic at this stage of their studies.

Conclusions: In France, the initial training of future health professionals must be rapidly adapted and must enable them to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to understand the health impacts of CC on the one hand and to reduce the impact of the health sector on the climate on the other to build climate resilient and environmentally sustainable health systems.

Key messages:

- French health students appear to be committed to the fight against climate change.
- Initial training of future health professionals needs to be adapted to give them the knowledge and skills to understand the challenges of climate change with health and the health system.