

Planetary Health in CanMEDS 2025

La santé planétaire dans CanMEDS 2025

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Introduction

The worsening impact of the climate emergency on health is increasingly apparent. A recent literature review identified Planetary Health as an evolving concept that is relevant to the CanMEDS physician competency framework.¹ In the context of physician competencies, planetary health is concerned with minimizing the impact of healthcare on the climate emergency and the impact of the climate emergency on patient care. This manuscript aims to establish the critical importance of including planetary health links in CanMEDS and to propose opportunities for future iterations of CanMEDS to exemplify planetary health concepts.

What is planetary health and why is it important to physician competency?

The Planetary Health Alliance defines planetary health as “a solutions-oriented, transdisciplinary field and social movement focused on analyzing and addressing the impacts of human disruptions to Earth’s natural systems on human health and all life on Earth.”² Planetary health addresses both the climate emergency and other ecological crises, including land destruction, biodiversity loss, and pollution.³ The climate emergency is considered the greatest health threat to human life this century, with predictions of 250,000 additional deaths per year from 2030 onward.⁴

The health of people in Canada is already affected by the climate emergency⁵: in 2021, at just 1.2 degrees Celsius of warming, over 700 people died in British Columbia's (B.C.) heat dome event,⁶ crops failed in Manitoba and Saskatchewan droughts contributing to rising food prices,⁷ flooding took out entire communities in B.C. and Newfoundland,⁸ and wildfires engulfed large parts of western Canada⁹ and northern Ontario.¹⁰ Healthcare service delivery is also being increasingly disrupted as extreme weather damages critical infrastructure and interrupts supply chains.¹¹ The climate emergency has a disproportionate impact on the health of Indigenous populations across Canada,¹² as environmental destruction threatens traditional lifestyles and exacerbates ongoing processes of colonization and land dispossession.¹³

The health sector is a significant contributor to the problem. The Canadian health sector is the second most carbon-intensive health care system on the planet,⁴ contributing 4.6% of Canada’s greenhouse gas emissions—on par with the country’s aviation industry.¹⁴ Modelling from the National Health Service in the United Kingdom suggests that nearly 70% of emissions come from medicines, equipment, and other aspects of the supply chain; 10% comes from travel; 10% comes from building energy; 5% from water and waste; and a full 5% from anesthetic gases and Metered Dose Inhalers (15). The federal government, together with other countries, has pledged to deliver a climate-resilient, low-carbon health care system, and significant advocacy from physicians will be required to ensure this transformation occurs.¹⁶ Models of sustainable healthcare have been developed and will

need to be implemented. One such framework for sustainable health systems proposes three categories of intervention: reduce demand for health services by addressing the Social Determinants of Health and engaging in health promotion and disease prevention; match the supply of health services to demand, ensuring appropriate care and avoiding unnecessary tests and treatment; and reduce emissions from the supply of health services.¹⁷

As respected voices, physicians have a unique role to play in planetary health and the climate emergency.¹⁸ They must be prepared to be advocates for planetary health. Physicians can act at the micro (patient) level, meso (clinic, hospital, community) level, and macro (policy) level.¹⁹ Physicians can advocate for climate action and mitigation and build climate resilience into healthcare.^{11,17} Improved training in planetary health and advocacy from medical school through Continuing Medical Education will be necessary to prepare physicians to practice in a climate emergency.

How is planetary health represented in the 2015 CanMEDS competency framework?

There are no explicit references to planetary health in the 2015 CanMEDS physician competency framework. The Health Advocate role does contain some enabling competencies that could be related to planetary health as it relates to the social determinants of health, disease prevention, health promotion, health surveillance, and improving community health (Table 1B). While climate scientists have been sounding the alarm on the climate emergency for decades, most health professionals have only recently begun to acknowledge the health system's role in causing the worsening planetary emergency as well as the need to reduce the climate emergency's associated morbidity and mortality by adopting adaptive measures.

How can planetary health be better represented within the 2025 CanMEDS competency framework?

In Table 1C, we propose the inclusion or modification of competencies that we believe would help to integrate our evolving understanding of planetary health within the CanMEDS physician competency framework. These suggestions incorporate four themes:

- Improving the sustainability of our health system. This theme recognizes the enormous environmental impact of healthcare delivery and the need for physicians to meet our professional obligation to “do no harm” by addressing this.¹⁷
- Improving the resilience of our health system to disruption from the climate emergency. Canadian healthcare systems are vulnerable to disruption by extreme weather events such as floods, wildfires, heatwaves, and storms that could be reduced by accelerating the implementation of climate-resilient healthcare systems to maintain critical care delivery.⁴ Physicians must recognize environmental vulnerabilities in healthcare and contribute to quality improvement processes to embed climate-resilience.²⁰
- Addressing the impact of the environment on patient health. Just as physicians consider a patient's social context, we must also consider their environmental context. Indigenous and racialized populations, those living in poverty, and others who are politically marginalized are disproportionately affected by environmental degradation. Physicians must understand the breadth and variety of environmental impacts on patients and their families.
- The importance of a planetary health lens in social accountability. Social accountability is defined as “the social contract that medicine has with society.”²¹ Socially accountable healthcare is responsive to patient, community, and population health needs.¹⁹ Socially accountable physicians must speak out about the social—and environmental—conditions that contribute to disease, suffering, and death.

Table 1. Planetary Health Competencies for the CanMEDS Physician Competency Framework.

A. CanMEDS 2015 Competencies directly applicable to Planetary Health

None	
B. CanMEDS 2015 Competencies partially related to Planetary Health	
Health Advocate 2.1: Work with a community or population to identify the determinants of health that affect them Health Advocate 2.2: Improve clinical practice by applying a process of continuous quality improvement to disease prevention, health promotion, and health surveillance activities Health Advocate 2.3: Contribute to a process to improve health in the community or population they serve	
C. Suggested additions or modifications for the CanMEDS 2025 Framework related to Planetary Health	
<i>New or Modified Competency</i>	<i>Rationale for change</i>
Medical Expert	
1.x (New): Recognize and respond to both social and environmental determinants of health in the presentation of patients.	There is growing recognition of the importance of incorporating social accountability into all aspects of medical practice. ²² Environmental sustainability is increasingly acknowledged as an important aspect of quality care. ²⁰
1.x (New): Consider environmental sustainability as an important dimension of the quality of care.	
5. (Modify): Actively contribute, as an individual and as a member of a team providing care, to the continuous improvement of healthcare quality, patient safety, climate-resilient healthcare, and healthcare sustainability.	
5.3 (New) Adopt strategies that ensure environmentally sustainable resource use, including low carbon and low environmental impact alternatives when appropriate.	
Communicator	
4.4 (New): Assist patients and their families to identify and address environmental factors contributing to the patient's health.	Environmental determinants of health are increasingly recognized alongside the social and structural determinants of health. ²³
Collaborator	
4. (New): Collaborate with health system leaders to adapt health services to reduce the environmental harm of healthcare delivery.	The majority of healthcare carbon emissions result from the supply chain. ¹⁴ We must therefore both modify our use of products and collaborate with suppliers to reduce emissions.
Leader	
2.2 (Modify): Apply evidence and management processes to achieve cost-appropriate and environmentally sustainable care.	A shift from prioritizing cost alone to including sustainability as an equivalent value will only occur through leadership.
3.2 (Modify): Facilitate change in healthcare to enhance services and outcomes, and increase their environmental sustainability.	
Health Advocate	
2.1 (Modify): Work with a community or population to identify the social and ecological determinants of health that affect them.	It is increasingly recognized that health is largely a consequence of both social and ecological determinants, with health care services contributing to only a small proportion of health.
2.2 (Modify): Improve clinical practice by applying a process of continuous quality improvement to disease prevention, health promotion, health surveillance, environmental sustainability, and climate-resilience activities.	Environmental sustainability is increasingly acknowledged as an important aspect of quality care. ²⁰
2.3 (Modify): Contribute to a process to improve health and environment in the community or population they serve.	Health and the environment are closely linked and the latter can be improved locally through advocacy.
Scholar	
4.6 (New): Minimize the environmental impact of the creation and dissemination of knowledge and practice.	There is growing recognition of the importance of incorporating social accountability into all aspects of medical practice, including research. ²²
4.3 (Modify) Contribute to the work of a research program that addresses questions important to the health of the population served, including the social and ecological determinants of health.	
4.4 (Modify) Pose questions amenable to scholarly inquiry and of importance to the health of the population served, and select appropriate methods to address them.	
Professional	
2.3 (New): Demonstrate a commitment to environmental sustainability.	Modeling best sustainable practices will facilitate its propagation throughout the healthcare system.

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