



# Sustainable conference guide

Conferences for healthcare professionals aim to improve health outcomes worldwide yet they also contribute to global warming and pollution.

This guide offers a handy checklist to make your next event more sustainable.



**Climate change is the ‘biggest global health threat of the 21st century’** causing an increase in heatwaves, wildfires, floods, droughts and crop failures, vector-borne diseases and mass migration. In addition, fossil fuel combustion, the main driver of global warming, is associated with air pollution which **contributes to around 1 in 5 deaths** worldwide each year.

Conferences are accompanied by thousands of carbon-intensive flights, hotel stays, single-use merchandise, and food and plastic waste. Medical conferences can generate the equivalent of between 1 to 4 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> per in person attendee, the equivalent of driving **between 6,800 and 27,000 km in a standard Australian car**. In addition, first or business class flights have 3 to 5 times the carbon footprint of economy class flights. These emissions are well above the annual limit of 2.3 tonnes per person worldwide if we are to keep emissions and warming to below 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels.

**Hotels and conference venues are substantial emitters** because of the intensive energy use of their buildings and operations. **Food service** often has generous portions of carbon-intensive foods such as meat and cheese, and as much as 50% of catered food ends up in landfill. Plastic bottles, single-use coffee cups, and event merchandise with short lifespans are widely available despite their substantial contributions to pollution.

**Events for healthcare professionals should set the standard for sustainability and environmental care.**

While it is tempting to claim that the gold-standard should be a carbon-neutral event, concerns around carbon offsets require further reflection (see explanatory notes). The emphasis needs to be on avoided emissions with offsets used as a last resort. Consider whether the event needs to happen in-person or whether there is an option for a hybrid event. Early planning is critical as is a change in culture and raising awareness by informing attendees of your actions to reduce their ecological footprint.

Sustainable conferences offer an opportunity for organisations of healthcare professionals to engage with their members to educate and empower them to extend their duty of care from their patients to include the planet. This could include information about reducing their own carbon footprint, reducing emissions from their workplace and information about how to engage in advocacy. The most meaningful ‘offsets’ from the conference might be those actions adopted by informed and engaged attendees willing to embrace sustainability in their lives.

The checklist offered below is one of many publicly available. Many are more comprehensive with extensive resources, such as **Sustainable event guidelines - City of Sydney ([nsw.gov.au](https://www.nsw.gov.au))** But sustainability is more than a series of tick boxes, it requires a change in our relationship to our resources both social and environmental. As health advocates, we have a role in fostering that perspective and the health co-benefits of action.

Conferences offer the opportunity to build the climate and health movement so that the healthcare professionals can show leadership in this public health crisis.



# Checklist for sustainable conferences

Event Planning		Notes
Develop a sustainability action plan		
Appoint a sustainability team/person		
Communicate your commitment to sustainability to participants and stakeholders		
See the Doctors for the Environment Australia's <a href="#">Green College Guidelines</a> for more ideas on reducing your organisation's carbon footprint		
Contact <a href="#">Doctors for the Environment Australia</a> for members interested in making your conference more sustainable		

Raising Awareness		Notes
<p>Include a conference session focussed on sustainability and health, or related topic</p> <p>Ask <a href="#">Doctors for the Environment Australia</a> for suggestions of topics and speakers</p>		
Inform attendees of the eco-friendly measures implemented at event and reasons for them		
Encourage actions for attendees to reduce their ecological footprint		
<p>Have a 'Green Stall' to support awareness raising and member engagement</p> <p>Include a <a href="#">Doctors for the Environment Australia</a> booth to raise awareness of the link between climate and health</p>		

Venue features		Notes
Green policy, action plan & established reporting procedures		
Green building certification e.g. Green Star Rating		
Accessibility by walking or public transport		
Videoconferencing facilities for hybrid events		

Procurement, equipment, and materials		Notes
Minimise printed materials - use electronic communication wherever possible (e.g. websites, email, SMS)		
Avoid printing programs, delegate handbooks and abstract booklets - provide information online, via an app, email or a memory stick		
Ensure event communication includes green messaging asking people to think before printing		
If printing is unavoidable, print double sided on recycled content paper & include request to recycle after use		
Minimise promotional material, delegate bags & other gifts		
If gifts are felt necessary, preference products produced from sustainable materials, from a local supplier with a useful purpose		
Investigate environmentally friendly options for name badges & lanyards to reduce plastic usage		

Catering		Notes
Preference caterers who follow sustainable guidelines for sourcing food		
Preference caterers with policies for responsible food procurement, recycling & disposal		
Preference local, seasonal & organic products		
Donate surplus food to local food redistribution organisations		
Reduce the amount of meat served or consider wholly vegetarian menu		
Request use of Fairtrade products where possible		
Clearly highlight to attendees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>vegetarian food offerings</li> <li>use of Fairtrade products</li> <li>recycling &amp; food waste systems in place</li> </ul>		
Avoid single use items such as plastic plates, cutlery & paper serviettes. Use crockery, glassware, metal cutlery & linen instead.		
Where this is not possible, use disposable items made from sustainable materials (e.g. plant-based plates, cups made from a high percentage of recycled plastic) that are compostable, biodegradable or recyclable at end of life		
Provide water stations with jugs of water or bulk dispensers & glasses		
Encourage participants to bring reusable water bottles & coffee cups		
Request providers offer discounts on coffee purchases when reusable cups are used		

Waste		Notes
Establish which waste streams can be managed at the chosen venue (e.g. general waste, mixed recycling, paper & cardboard, organic waste)		
Ensure clearly labelled receptacles for each type of waste in each bin area		

Carbon Accounting and Offsetting		Notes
Estimate carbon footprint of your event		
Considered offsetting carbon emissions to achieve a carbon neutral standard for the event - use offsets of the highest standards		
Offer delegates opportunity to contribute to offsetting event by purchasing 'green' tickets		
Encourage participants to offset their travel greenhouse gas emissions		
Consider initiatives to increase likelihood of offsets - e.g. integrate online calculator and/or offset payments into registration process, recommend an offset provider		

Monitoring and Reporting		Notes
Monitor and record progress on achieving sustainability - start with this checklist!		
Report back to delegates and stakeholders, e.g. overall progress, successes and plans for improvement at subsequent events		

Sponsors & Exhibitors		Notes
Seek those whose work/products reduce environmental impact of health care, including Doctors for the Environment Australia		
Discourage printed promotional materials - use QR codes instead		
Discourage coffee/drinks stands that do not provide reusable cups		
Include a conference session focussed on sustainability and health, or related topic		



# Explanatory notes

## Claiming Carbon Neutrality

Currently the only certification process that is available to claim a carbon-neutrality for an event is through the Australian Government's **Climate Active Carbon Neutral Standard for an Event** which is a voluntary standard to manage greenhouse gas emissions and to achieve carbon neutrality. It provides best-practice guidance on how to measure, reduce, offset and report emissions that occur as a result of an event's activities.

Engaging with a registered Climate Active consultant to facilitate the process is a good starting point - make sure you understand the fees, requirements and timelines in relation to your event. Some event companies are focused on delivering carbon neutral events and can guide you through the process.

Holding a carbon neutral event incurs costs which include:

- consultant management fees
- Climate Active submission and license
- an independent audit
- carbon credit funds
- approximately 20 hours of labour - the majority of time is spent on information gathering.

## Offsetting flights – is it a solution to our emissions?

**The use of offsets for flights and other emissions** is not an off-the-shelf solution to decarbonisation.

Offsets are founded on assumptions of equivalence – that it is possible to trade off harm in one location with good intentions elsewhere. However, it is not a simple trade off as burning fossil fuels releases geological carbon from what is essentially a permanent carbon store. Capturing carbon biologically in natural habitats and ecosystems – by tree planting, for example – is **not** equivalent as carbon is retained for a much shorter duration. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that those captured emissions will still be in place in the future, say, in 30 years time. A warming climate, more droughts and more frequent heatwaves increase the risks of bushfires which then release carbon stored in trees back into the atmosphere.

Unfortunately, many offsets schemes also do not provide real emission reductions. Many of the projects funded through offset financing are activities that were going to happen anyway. A further concern is that reliance on offsets potentially delays real mitigation strategies.

Nonetheless, if a decision is made to use offsets, it is important that the highest standards for offsets are used and preferably sourced locally where compliance might be more easily monitored.

The focus remains on the need for real emissions reductions. Engaging with attendees so they are supported to take steps in reducing their personal carbon footprint would make the most overall impact to offset the conference's carbon footprint.

## Personal action

**The average Australian has an annual carbon footprint equivalent to 15 tonnes of carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>e).**

Globally, the entire population needs to have a **carbon footprint of only 2.3 tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub>e per year by 2030 to limit global heating to 1.5 above pre-industrial levels.**

There are simple measures that can be undertaken to reduce this figure, such as reducing household energy use, improving energy efficiencies, installing rooftop solar, purchasing 'green energy', adopting a reduced meat, plant-rich diet and reducing transport emissions. If attendees were to leave the conference adopting some of these measures, they would easily provide the 'offsets' for the conference.

## Green stalls

A 'green stall' provides a set of resources for attendees to reduce their personal carbon footprint or workplace emissions. A 'green stall' can be an important part of advocacy at your conference.

## Acknowledgement

This guide has been adapted from:

Green Nephrology Action Team (GNAT),  
**Sustainable event guide**. Australia New Zealand  
Society of Nephrology (ANZSN), Renal Society of  
Australasia and Kidney Health Australia, 2019.

## Supplementary resources

Doctors for the Environment Australia

**Green College Guidelines**

Other **health professional education resources**

**IFMSA August Meeting 2018 Sustainability Report**

**Sustainable event guidelines - City of Sydney**

**Sustainable Events Guide: Give Your Large Event  
A Small Footprint**

**Achieving a carbon neutral standard for events**

**Carbon Offset Guide**



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