

Minister Keegan speech at COP26 Climate Action for Health event

Thank you Dr. Neira for that introduction.

And thank you to the panel, it was a fantastic, informative and lively discussion. Thank you to Minister Morton for chairing it so expertly.

I guess we all really enjoyed hearing the insights and also the progress that's being made.

I'd like to send my best wishes to Dr Hala Zayed the Egyptian Health Minister who was due to join the panel today, and thank you for stepping in, but was sadly admitted to hospital last week.

We wish her all the very best for her recovery and I very much hope that she'll be hosting us at COP27 in Egypt next year.

So on behalf of the UK Government, thank you everybody for joining us here in Glasgow for COP26.

And this is a Conference where health is very much on the agenda.

There was a time when people might have wondered what a health minister was doing at a summit about climate change.

But those days are gone. There is now widespread recognition including here of course in the room today that climate change isn't just an environmental emergency.

It's a global health emergency too.

According to the UN, climate change is expected to cause around 250,000 extra deaths a year between 2030 and 2050.

And we know that climate change affects so many of the things that make us safe and healthy today.

The air we breathe, the water we drink and how safe and secure we feel in our communities.

Our health and our environment go hand in hand, it's clear.

And although we've made huge strides in advancing health security across the world, we cannot allow this great work to be undone by the destabilising threat of climate change.

And it's not just a threat to our health, but a threat to our health systems too.

Health systems around the world are already seeing the impact of climate

change on the frontline.

Such as greater demand for health services due to reducing crop production, to water insecurity and natural disasters.

So it's vital that we build up resilience to climate change within our health systems allowing them to anticipate and respond to any climate related shocks, like disruption to supply chains and damage to infrastructure.

But most of all, we need to make sure that our health systems themselves are not part of the problem.

And we've heard today, health systems currently contribute around 4 to 5 per cent of global carbon emissions.

If they were a country, they would be the fifth largest emitter.

On top of that, health professionals all around the world are telling us that we need to go further.

They see the negative impact of climate change on their patients, and they know there is no time to spare.

Representatives from over 100 nations making up over three quarters of the world's health professionals have signed the Healthy Climate Prescription demanding more action to address the climate crisis.

And we must all heed this call.

And think about what change we can make within our health systems.

Like the impact of the hospitals we build, the supply chains that we create and even the vehicles we use.

NHS travel and transport which makes up 3.5% of all road traffic in England.

And here today you can see the world's first hydrogen electric zero emission ambulance that's capable of travelling up to 300 miles before re-charging, which was developed here in this country.

And we're working across borders too.

We've been partnering with countries in the Caribbean to support smart hospitals that are more resilient to extreme weather events and that use green technologies, like solar panels, to reduce the impact on the environment.

Because if our shared experience of this pandemic has taught us anything it's that our actions have an impact on those far beyond our shores.

And today, we've seen yet more shared solidarity in response to this looming threat, with some concrete commitments being made.

As we heard, 50 nations – from all across the world – have made pledges.

Like to develop low carbon sustainable health systems on the path towards net zero and to develop national strategies to make health systems more resilient to climate change.

And I'm proud that the UK Government and the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have also played our part.

Today, we've all shown that health leaders, and our health systems, have an important voice in the climate debate.

And a huge opportunity to make an impact.

And as well as these firm commitments we must also work to understand more about the common threat of climate change.

Because even as we meet here as an international community for the 26th time there are gaps in our collective knowledge that we need to fill.

To fully understand how our health systems can be built to withstand the impact of climate change and to protect the health of the people we serve.

We can't sit back and wait for the evidence to come to us.

Because the longer we wait, the worse the impact will be.

So today I'm pleased to announce our National Institute for Health Research is developing a new package of sustainability funding.

This includes £20 million of funding for research to develop new evidence. And that will be focused on improving the health outcomes of those most impacted by climate change in developing countries.

There really is no time to spare.

One of the greatest successes of the pandemic was the way that nations worked together at rapid pace to pool our knowledge and our expertise.

Like sharing data from vaccine clinical trials, setting up databases for genomic sequencing.

Now, we need to draw on this same spirit, for the equally urgent threat of climate change.

In recent months, our health systems have been at the forefront of one of the battles of our times.

Now, we must make sure they are at the forefront of another.

As our nations recover and rebuild from this pandemic, let us seize the opportunity that Glasgow has given us.

For our health, for our planet, and for our future generations.

Thank you very much.