



The Royal College of Pathologists
Pathology: the science behind the cure

Introducing our new Sustainability Lead for Pathology Practice, Dr Shireen Kassam

Climate change is a major risk to global health. Pathology as a profession must work towards a sustainable future.

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In the new College role of Sustainability Lead for Pathology Practice, Dr Shireen Kassam outlines her aims for raising the profile of sustainability in pathology practice.

I am excited and honoured to have been appointed to the College role of Sustainability Lead for Pathology Practice, with the role of advancing sustainability initiatives both within the College and across the wider pathology community. For College operations, the Trustee Board has agreed a 42% reduction in absolute carbon emissions by 2032 from our initial baseline as an interim target and a net zero target date of 2040. This being a new role brings both challenges and advantages. It does, however, allow me to shape the role in a way that meets the expectation of our members.

Who am I?

I am a consultant haematologist at King's College Hospital, London with a passion for preventative and sustainable healthcare. My role includes haemato-pathology, clinical work and being a medical examiner, so I can relate to many aspects of our profession. To date, I have been supporting sustainability initiatives in a personal capacity by providing education and advocacy on preventative healthcare using a plant-based, lifestyle medicine approach, as further explored in my April 2024 Bulletin article, [Plant-based diets – an underutilised way to tackle our health and climate crises](#). I now want to support my profession to play its part in creating a liveable future for all.



The College is embedding sustainability in everything we do.

Why is sustainability in healthcare important?

“Without decisive and urgent action, the climate crisis will increasingly undermine human health and disrupt healthcare delivery. There are both moral and practical reasons for health professionals to be at the forefront of climate action.”¹

We are in the midst of a global, inter-related crisis of health, climate breakdown and biodiversity loss. According to a [Health Care Without Harm report](#), healthcare contributes around 4–5% of all greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the planet. This may sound small, but it makes the sector (if it were a country) the fifth largest climate polluter on the planet.

It is human activity that is warming the planet. We have now breached 6 of the 9 planetary boundaries that maintain our current way of life, as identified by the [Stockholm Resilience Centre](#). The [2024 Global Report of the Lancet Countdown](#) states that we are “facing record-breaking threats from delayed action” and, in the words of António Guterres, United Nations Secretary General, speaking to world leaders at COP29, “Climate action is not optional, it’s an imperative... indispensable to a liveable world. The clock is ticking. I count on you.” We will all recognise the devastating consequences of climate inaction both at home and abroad. Business as usual is not an option. We all have to take action as individuals and as a profession.

What is sustainable healthcare?

There are 4 principles of sustainable healthcare, all of which are relevant to pathology practice. They are:

1. prevention
2. patient empowerment
3. lean pathways
4. low-carbon alternatives.

These need to be embedded into all we do at the College, be it within guidelines, in our investments and operations, or within research and innovation.

What will be the responsibilities of the Sustainability Lead?

The responsibilities of the Sustainability Lead include raising awareness among members, trainees and pathology professionals about the importance of sustainability in healthcare. This may involve organising educational programmes, workshops and webinars on sustainable practices in pathology, providing guidance to support the pathology community in adopting environmentally friendly procedures and fostering collaboration with sustainability leads of Pathology Alliance members, external organisations and industry partners to advance sustainability goals. The Sustainability Lead will represent the College in relevant sustainability forums, conferences and working groups to share knowledge and best practice, and provide clinical input for, and liaise with, the College's policy team on sustainability issues. I will report to College Council on sustainability issues.

We also need to take action as a profession to ensure pathology practice is future-proof. There are already excellent initiatives taking place, such as [green audit schemes in diagnostic laboratories](#), which we can all learn from and incorporate into our working lives.

What's next?

My first task is to bring together like-minded individuals who share my passion for creating a liveable future and working towards a sustainable healthcare service. I want to understand and showcase the great work you are already doing. I also aim to raise the profile and urgency of sustainability within our profession. Please get in touch via shireen.kassam@nhs.net.

[Reference available on our website.](#)

Meet the author



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