

Building Environmental Health Initiatives that Prioritise Equity for Underprivileged Populations

Professional Perspectives by Belynda Abbott FICDA FACN,
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Belynda Abbott is an accomplished nurse leader, educator, and innovator with over 24 years of distinguished service across clinical, operational, governance, and academic domains within the Australian healthcare system. Her career spans diverse settings in the Northern Territory and Queensland, where she has consistently demonstrated excellence in nursing practice and leadership. Currently a Nurse Lecturer and PhD student at the University of Canberra, Belynda is committed to shaping the future of nursing through education, mentorship, and advocacy. A published author and international presenter, she is recognised for advancing nursing education and leadership development. As a Fellow and former Board Director of the Australian College of Nursing (ACN), she has played a pivotal role in strengthening the profession nationally. Belynda is also a Global Nurse Leadership Institute (GNLI) scholar with the International Council of Nurses. Her GNLI Western Pacific Region team has led a regional initiative addressing heat-related illness among vulnerable populations, reflecting her dedication to Planetary Health and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Beyond academia, Belynda is a Life and Success Coach, empowering healthcare professionals to thrive in their careers. She exemplifies the values of leadership, innovation, and service, and is a proud ambassador for the nursing profession.

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1. Could you share your professional journey from clinical nursing to academia and leadership, and what inspired your ongoing commitment to planetary and population health?

I have always been the type of person driven by purpose. My nursing career began 24 years ago in a Neuroscience Unit in Brisbane, where I cared for patients and families facing life-altering neurological conditions. These early experiences taught me the profound impact of compassionate care and the importance of understanding the broader factors influencing health.

My journey then took me to Darwin in the Northern Territory, where I worked in General Medicine, Infectious Diseases and



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Hyperbaric Medicine. It was there that I deepened my understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health disparities and developed a deep appreciation for the lands and cultures of our First Nations peoples from the tranquil waters of Kakadu to the sunsets on Larrakia Country.

Early in my career, I embraced education and leadership, serving in roles such as Nurse Unit Manager, Clinical Nurse Consultant, Assistant Director of Nursing, and Nursing Director. I also became actively involved in professional organisations, one of which I was heavily involved in was the Australian College of

Nursing. I also pursued further education, earning a Master of Healthcare Leadership, a Graduate Diploma in Clinical



By equipping nurses to lead with purpose and compassion, we shape sustainable futures and safeguard both people and the planet for generations to come.

Education, a Diploma in Governance, and a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. These experiences shaped my belief that nurses are uniquely positioned to lead systemic change.

Now, as a Lecturer at the University of Canberra and a PhD student, my focus is on how nurses can address the health impacts of extreme heat events on older populations. My commitment to planetary and population health is rooted in the recognition that anthropogenic climate change disproportionately affects our vulnerable communities. Nurses, as trusted professionals embedded in every corner of society, have a vital role in advocating for both human and ecological wellbeing. My journey continues to be guided by purpose toward a more equitable, sustainable, and resilient future for all.

2. As a Global Nurse Leadership Institute (GNLI) scholar, how has your work as a part of this program shaped your perspective on health equity and climate vulnerability?

I feel incredibly privileged to be a Global Nurse Leadership Institute (GNLI) scholar through the International Council of Nurses. This transformative program deepened my understanding of health policy and provided a unique opportunity to collaborate with nurse leaders from around the world. As part of the Western Pacific Region cohort, I worked alongside inspiring colleagues from Malaysia, Taiwan, and South Korea to highlight the growing threat of climate vulnerability particularly the health impacts of extreme heat events.

Together, we developed a global webinar aimed at empowering healthcare professionals, especially nurses, to take a proactive role in mitigating heat-related health risks. We are now working toward a position paper that draws on current research to advocate for enhanced heat safety strategies for vulnerable populations across the Western Pacific Region. This experience has reinforced my belief that nurses are not only caregivers but also powerful policy influencers and climate advocates. It has shaped my perspective on health equity by highlighting the urgent need for inclusive, climate-resilient healthcare systems that prioritise those most at risk.

3. You've served as a nurse, educator, and board director. How have these diverse roles influenced your approach to developing sustainable and inclusive health initiatives?

Serving as a nurse, educator, and board director has given me a multifaceted view of healthcare. These roles have taught me the importance of inclusive governance, culturally responsive education, and community-led solutions. I believe I need to 'walk the talk' and strive to embed sustainability and equity into every conversation and initiative, ensuring that policies and programs that I am involved in are both environmentally conscious and socially just.

Healthcare is far from perfect, "If the global health care sector were a country, it would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet." (Health Care Climate Footprint Report by Health Care Without Harm and Arup, 2019). The report also states that the health care sector contributes approximately 4.4-5% of global greenhouse gas emission, making it a major contributor to climate change. This reality underscores why healthcare professionals must lead decisions that influence health outcomes, from the individual patient to the broader community. Each role I've held has equipped me with strategies and tools to advocate for these critical initiatives and drive meaningful change.

4. During your time in the Health Emergency Operations Centre during COVID-19, what lessons did you take away about protecting vulnerable populations during large-scale crises?

Working in the Health Emergency Operations Centre during COVID-19 highlighted the critical need for agile, equity-driven responses. Vulnerable populations especially older adults and those that are isolated from the community faced heightened health risks. Key lessons I learnt included the importance of clear communication, localised support, and cross-sector collaboration to protect those most at risk during crises.

I had the opportunity and privileged position to work with multifaceted teams from health care, police, defence and not

for profit organisations to ensure the safety of our teams and the public. This required a disaster management framework, with precision decision making, targeted communication and the agility to pivot when changes occurred.

5. What does leadership in sustainability and equity mean to you in the context of nursing and healthcare systems today?

Leadership today means championing systems that prioritise long-term wellbeing over short-term gains. In nursing and healthcare, this means advocating for climate-resilient infrastructure, equitable access to care, and empowering frontline professionals to lead change. It's about fostering a culture where sustainability and equity are not optional, but foundational.

While progress has been made, we still have a long way to go in fully understanding our roles and responsibilities in creating sustainable and equitable healthcare practices. This is why I am undertaking my PhD, to develop the research skills needed and contribute to something bigger than myself: shaping a future where healthcare is more than just treating an illness, it is a service that cares, promotes wellness, advocates for equity and access and ensures sustainability demonstrated through integrated action and evidence-based practice.

6. How can nurses and healthcare educators integrate environmental justice and sustainability principles into daily clinical and academic practice?

Firstly, I would like to acknowledge the incredible work that has already been commenced in this space, thanks to the leadership of Distinguished Professor Tracy Levett-Jones from the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the project team. Their Delphi study has sought expert consensus on the knowledge and skills required for undergraduate nursing students to advocate for healthcare practices that uphold both human dignity and environmental integrity for a more sustainable future (Levett-Jones, et al. 2023). I am privileged to be a part of the Planetary Health Collaborative for Nurses and Midwives to support this incredible work.

The International Council of Nurses (ICN) has reinforced this imperative in its updated definition of a nurse (2025):

“Nurses provide people-centred, compassionate clinical and social care, manage services, enhance health systems, advance public and population health, and foster safe and sustainable environments. Nurses lead, educate, research, advocate, innovate and shape policy to improve health outcomes.” (International Council of Nurses, 2025).

This definition makes it clear that sustainability is no longer optional, it is integral to nursing practice. Therefore, nurses and educators must embed sustainability into curricula, advocate for healthcare practices through a planetary health lens, and incorporate environmental determinants into clinical assessments.

7. How do the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) influence your teaching and advocacy for universal healthcare and planetary health?

The SDGs provide a powerful framework for linking local action to global goals. In my teaching, I use them to highlight the interconnectedness of health, equity, and sustainability. They help students see their role not just as future healthcare professionals, but as global citizens contributing to universal healthcare and planetary health.

8. Finally, what message would you like to share with the next generation of nurses and healthcare professionals about their role in advancing environmental health equity and sustainability?

To the next generation: your voice matters. Nurses are trusted, skilled, and deeply embedded in communities. Within the State of the World's Nursing Report (WHO & ICN, 2025) there are approximately 29.8 million nurses and midwives worldwide, accounting for nearly 60% of all healthcare professionals. You have the power to lead change whether through education, research, advocacy, or innovation. Embrace sustainability, champion equity, and never underestimate your impact on shaping a healthier and more equitable world. [HO](#)