



# Oral health wellness through the global lens

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provides an overview of the

work of the International Coalition, the oral health practitioner group who came together for the Global Oral Health Conference at COP26 – the 26<sup>th</sup> United Nations Climate Change Conference.

Oral health neglect has long been highlighted as a global issue, with the World Health Organisation (WHO) making clear that ‘nearly half of the world’s population are affected’.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the WHO adds that ‘stark and persistent socio-economic inequalities in oral diseases exist with a higher disease burden found in disadvantaged and marginalised population groups’.<sup>1</sup>

Looking closer at the Global Oral Health Action Plan (2023–2030)<sup>2</sup> it is apparent that oral diseases are aligned to major global health concerns. Oral diseases noted as noncommunicable diseases (NCDs) are framed as needing stronger commitment through Universal Health Coverage (UHC), with an emphasis on prevention and control, across the life course.

On such a grand scale this has to take a global perspective and become the responsibility of us all. Bringing together the Global Oral Health Plan and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs, <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>) as we rethink the way in which we can best contribute to this bigger picture, must be our starting point. It is important that we think: about people, the planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership, as we look to sustainable oral health for all. The key is that people should be able to ‘maintain their oral health in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress’.<sup>3</sup> It is perhaps important to first

understand what is meant by ‘sustainable oral health’. Fisher *et al.*<sup>4</sup> provide an excellent explanation:

‘Sustainable oral health recognises that oral health is intrinsic and inseparable from general health and well-being, and that oral health care is an integral part of health and development from the very first moments of life and throughout the life course.

‘Sustainable oral health approaches enable a person to maintain their oral health in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, or significant sources of stress. This can be achieved by:

- Grounding oral health in the Agenda for Sustainable Development and the 17 SDGs so that collective efforts meet the oral health needs of current populations without compromising the capacity and capability to meet the needs of future generations
- Taking action in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet through whole of government, whole of society approaches
- Committing political and financial resources to oral health in order to strengthen leadership and create win-win partnerships within and outside the health sector
- Adopting innovative workforce models and revising and expanding competency-based and interprofessional education to respond to population oral health needs
- Integrating essential oral health care into primary care, and ensuring related financial protection and essential supplies
- Enhancing surveillance and health information systems to provide timely and relevant feedback on the status of oral health to decision-makers for evidence-based policymaking.<sup>24</sup>

It is against this backdrop that the International Coalition came together in the first instance to explore and investigate sustainable oral health for older people in developed countries and how it could be mirrored in developing countries. Finally, the role of the dental nurse, dental assistant, and oral care support workers was explored, and suggestions were made as to how they could be better utilised. The need to work smarter and better was deemed to be inevitable if the desired outcomes were to be met.

This work came about as the International Coalition embarked on the Sustainable Oral Health course, which grounded the agenda of Oral Health for All<sup>5</sup> and the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, looking at the opportunities and the implications and

*‘The big question is where are we in the grand scheme of things, and what more can be done? The Coalition has explored the links between planetary health and human health and made the connections to inequalities and oral health; will you?’*

the relationships between sustainability, planetary, and human health. The course was run by the University of Berlin in conjunction with Glasgow University, titled ‘Global Oral Health Education Module’ and a certificate was jointly awarded by both institutions. Key to the course was the exploration of how members of the oral health team could prepare, adapt, and mitigate for the impact of climate change. A further dimension considered potential innovations in oral health, including the virtual world and technology. Finally, the course focused on global citizenship for oral health and the sharing and exchanging of ideas, projects, and experiences.

Working with colleagues from outside of the United Kingdom gave the Coalition a more rounded starting point and gaining the experience of presenting on a global platform was a humbling experience. The International Coalition took another aspect of the life-course oral health commitment, in preparation for COP27 and focused on pre-school children. This project will be presented soon and will then be shared.

So, the big question is where are we in the grand scheme of things, and what more can be done? The Coalition has explored the links between planetary health and human health and made the connections to inequalities and oral health; will you?

Next time you plan an oral health project or improvement, ensure you consider and embed the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals, in an order that meets the broader needs and demands of the population or community of people you are working with, and remember, if we simply focus on reducing the carbon footprint, we are truly missing opportunities to address inequalities and to provide sustainable oral health for all.

Related topics on behalf of the International Coalition include sustainability in dentistry, skill-mix and sustainability, oral health, sustainability, and you – procurement matters.

*Acknowledgments must be paid to the International Coalition working groups of COP26 and COP27.*

#### Recommended further reading:

Duane B. *Sustainable dentistry: making a difference*. Springer, 2022. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-07999-3> (accessed January 2024).

#### References

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4. Fisher J, Berman R, Buse K *et al.* Achieving oral health for all through public health approaches, interprofessional, and transdisciplinary education. *NAM Perspect* 2023; doi: 10.31478/202302b.
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<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41407-024-2063-y>