

Episode: *Editorial Fellow Interview: “Why Health Care Needs Sustainable Waste Stream Management”*

Guest: Natasha Sood, MPH

Host: Tim Hoff

Transcript by: Cheryl Green

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[bright theme music]

TIM HOFF: Welcome to another episode of the *Author Interview series* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*. I'm your host, Tim Hoff. This series provides an alternative format for accessing the interesting and important work being done by Journal contributors each month. Joining me on this episode is Natasha Sood, a fourth-year medical student at Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, Pennsylvania, a co-founder of Medical Students for a Sustainable Future, and the creator and Project Director of Climate Resources for Health Education. Along with Dr Gaurab Basu, Natasha is the editorial fellow who helped develop the October 2022 issue of the *AMA Journal of Ethics*, [Health Care Waste](#). Natasha, thank you so much for being on the podcast. [music fades]

NATASHA SOOD: Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

HOFF: So, why did you decide to develop a theme issue on this topic in particular?

SOOD: Well, over the last few years, I've found that the medical community has really honed in on the cross-cutting nature of climate change and its impact on health. But I really think, and I, like many others, think that it's very much of a two-way relationship. The health system, and specifically the US health system, is a significant contributor of global greenhouse gas emissions. And actually, if it were its own country, would be the 13th largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet and the second largest industry to contribute to landfill waste. And I was just really struck by this, and I, like so many others, felt like this was a missed opportunity to address health problems. Because when health systems contribute to climate change, climate change then continues to adversely impact the health of our communities, both locally and abroad, whether it's through emissions or waste streams.

And I felt that many of us in the health care community felt like this went against our oath to do no harm. So, we wanted to create an issue where we could explore, through cases and commentaries, not just why we need sustainable health care and sustainable health care education in health systems science, but also, what we as individuals and institutions can do about it.

HOFF: And so, what's the most important thing for health professions students and trainees to take from this issue?

SOOD: Well, I think that I really want to highlight the fact that our health systems are built on this assumption of infinite natural resources and healthy ecosystems. And we don't really think about it in our day-to-day lives, but our ability to deliver care directly depends on our relationship with nature, because it is ultimately what provides us with the resources that we need to keep our hospitals and clinics running 24/7 or make vaccines and provide health care. So, we have built our entire economy on this assumption of

ecological stability. But as you've likely heard in the news, we are at a tipping point, and every IPCC report that comes out continues to highlight that significant cuts in greenhouse gas emissions need to be made in order to prevent temperatures from exceeding 1.5 degrees Celsius. I think the latest number was 45 percent by 2030. So, as a significant contributor to this problem, I think that the health sector has an obligation to really examine our sector's environmental footprint and invest in climate-smart health care and really redefine what it means to do no harm.

And I think that I also really wanted to highlight that how the health sector emissions and waste streams contribute to the unequal impact of waste on Black, Indigenous, and minority communities. We know that the health of communities of color are disproportionately affected by toxic waste facilities, landfills, and waste processing centers, and we really need to understand and address the ways that the health sector itself is contributing to these health inequities. Because we know that in contributing to waste, it's, in turn, contributing to climate change, and climate change is a fundamental driver of health inequity across all sectors, whether you're talking about mental health, racial injustice, food insecurity, forced migration. But climate action and the financial and the political investment in these sustainable systems, especially sustainable health systems, these closed-loop systems are really centered on stewardship, preventative medicine, equity, and they are the systems that we believe can really secure health into our future, not at the expense of our planet and patients, but rather for them.

HOFF: Any final points of consideration for listeners and readers as they make their way through this issue?

SOOD: Well, I really want readers and people listening in to feel empowered. Yes, climate and sustainability can be an overwhelming topic, but the solutions that we need, which are discussed throughout our issue, really exist already through Health Care Without Harm, Practice Green Health, The National Academy of Medicine Collaborative on Decarbonizing the Health Care Sector, and the Global Consortium on Climate and Health Education. There are so many programs out there that are actively addressing these issues, but we need the human and financial investment at our institutions, in our regions, and at the federal level to make this a reality.

And we've really seen this over the last year. We've made significant strides in sustainable health investment, most recently, the Inflation Reduction Act. But also, COP26 in November of 2021, the US Department of Health and Human Services committed to reducing emissions at federal health facilities, and almost 20 US health systems made similar commitments. [theme music returns] So, I hope that that, in conjunction with our issue, really leaves people excited to serve as change agents at their own institutions and make strides in this space.

HOFF: Natasha, thank you for being on the podcast today and for your help in developing this issue on this very important topic.

SOOD: Thank you so much for having me, Tim.

HOFF: To read the full October 2022 issue on *Health Care Waste* for free, visit our site, [JournalOfEthics.org](https://www.journalofethics.org). We'll be back soon with more *Ethics Talk* from the *American Medical Association Journal of Ethics*.