

Description

Climate Change and Childbirth: Does it Matter?

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Introduction

Climate change is an urgent issue of which there is growing awareness, especially in light of the recent UN Climate Change Conference (COP26) held in Glasgow. In fact, 64% of people worldwide believe that climate change is a global emergency.[1] Yet in the era of coronavirus, sustainability appears to have taken a backseat, with millions of pieces of personal protective equipment used and bins full of single-use face masks outside each maternity unit. So how do climate change and childbirth relate?

Healthcare carbon emissions

Entonox is widely used during labour, with almost 80% of women utilising it at some point during their birth.[2] It is widely available, cheap, portable, and well accepted by women. Entonox, however, is made up of oxygen mixed with nitrous oxide, which is a powerful greenhouse gas. Nitrous oxide has a more potent warming effect than other gases, up to 298 times that of carbon dioxide, and the amount of Entonox used in an ‘average labour’ equates to the same carbon footprint as driving a car 1,400 miles![3]

In total, gases from healthcare equate to 5% of carbon emissions per year.[4] At present, almost none of those gases are recycled or broken down but instead released into the atmosphere, where they remain for up to 100 years.

As pregnant women and people become more aware of their own impact on the environment, are they aware that the gases they utilise during birth may outlive their children?

What can we do about greenhouse gas use in maternity systems? Whilst Entonox may not be going anywhere, there are now systems being developed and used that can break down the nitrous oxide and convert it into harmless gases. Two UK hospitals have started using these systems, and others will hopefully follow suit. But as a midwife, what measures can we take personally?

- Discuss the environmental impact of Entonox and other greenhouse gases such as those used in theatre with colleagues and those in your care
- Incorporate discussions into antenatal education, considering the environmental impact when discussing advantages and disadvantages of pain relief methods

- Encourage use of alternative forms of analgesia, such as water submersion, TENS, aromatherapy and massage, which may reduce the need for pharmacological pain relief[5] and therefore reduce the amount of Entonox used overall
- Discuss with your maternity unit about their use of greenhouse gases and consider the use of recycling systems to break down the nitrous oxide
- Liaise with your hospital board and directors to challenge the use of gases within your organisation and their strategy to reduce emissions.

Aside from gas emissions, many families are striving to reduce their own carbon footprint and their plastic waste. Items such as reusable nappies and wipes are becoming more popular and mainstream, and are even popping up on supermarket shelves. Additionally, the second-hand market for baby items is growing, with women and families conscious of the cost and waste of buying things new.

Educating on environmental issues

What can we do to improve sustainability and education around wider climate issues within maternity?

- Ask the childbearing woman or person about their focus on climate issues as part of personalised care planning. Is climate change a priority for them?
- Encourage breastfeeding or chestfeeding, as this has less environmental impact than formula feeding.
- Encourage the use of reusable baby products, including baby wipes and nappies. These alone contribute to 2–3% of household waste each year.
- Appoint a maternity environment champion at the hospital to raise awareness of environmental issues and the impact on our planet.

The legacy of our actions today will impact our environment for many future generations, and as midwives, we can play an important role in highlighting the influence our actions may have on the world. **TPM**

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