

Reducing red meat consumption is one of the biggest changes we can make to address our carbon footprint

By Sarah Webb

As a public health registrar, I have the privileged position of being involved with many different projects over a number of organisations. On the way to becoming public health consultants, public health registrars are placed in local authorities, CCGs, health protection units, acute and primary care organisations, research organisations, larger NHS bodies, the media and even the voluntary sector. We work with a variety of teams, all working with the common aim of protecting and promoting the health of the general public.

As a group, we have recently embarked on a joint project to promote environmental sustainability as individuals and in the public health organisations that we work with. Sustainability focuses on “meeting our present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs”. This means we should be conscious about the choices we make in terms of the food we eat and the way we travel and work.

We were motivated by the impact that climate change will have on global population health; through the threatened rise in heat related morbidity and mortality, coastal flooding, the spread of insect-borne diseases and food and water scarcity. The IPCC has recently released a report outlining the urgent need to take steps to limit global warming to a 1.5C rise by 2050. Policies and strategies being laid down now will represent the first steps to achieving this goal, but only if we pay attention to making sure aspects of sustainability are included as an integral part of our plans. We have chosen to focus on a few key areas of environmental sustainability; food, travel and transport and teaching.

Reducing red meat consumption is one of the biggest changes we can make as individuals to address our carbon footprint. Of all agricultural products, cattle are the largest producers of greenhouse gas emissions through their digestive tracts, wildly outstripping the emissions produced by other livestock and arable crops. Methane (the main greenhouse gas produced by cattle) has a large warming effect in the Earth’s atmosphere, yet only lasts 10-12 years in the Earth’s atmosphere. Reducing methane emissions could reduce greenhouse emissions in a fairly short time in comparison with reducing other greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide, which may take up to 200 years to be broken down. Making changes to capture this low hanging fruit would make a good start on the 1.5C limit by 2050. Reducing the demand for cattle farming would have additional environmental benefits, such as reduction of deforestation for grazing and reduction of land requirement for growing crops to feed

livestock.

To this end, when we held a welcome picnic for our new registrar colleagues in August we went completely meat-free. Plastic wrapping was also banned, so we had to be creative about how we made and transported the food items. We borrowed crockery and cutlery from a local canteen and we took home any leftovers rather than binning them. We are also encouraging our local workplaces to consider reducing or removing beef from the menu.

I was pleased to be invited to share some of the learning that we have collectively undertaken with the Public Health Dorset team at our away day last month. I was tasked with persuading the team that the vegetarian lunch they were about to be served was in fact very appropriate for such an occasion and there would be no reason to lynch the organisers for ditching the beef! Thankfully the team were very receptive to the reasoning behind a meat-free meal and I heard some very complementary comments about the food. Subsequently, I have received feedback from several members of the team to say that they have gone on to inspire the meat-free message among others, which for me was the most sought-after outcome.

Collectively making small changes, such as having one meat free day per week, is the first step towards limiting the impact of global warming. We can all make small changes, if we make sustainability a priority.