

Australian healthcare workers' perspectives, practices, and perceived barriers to a more sustainable health system: a cross-sectional survey

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Background

Climate change is the greatest global health threat of the 21st century, responsible for 13 million deaths annually and projected to increase by 250,000 deaths per year by the 2030. The healthcare system itself is a significant contributor to climate change. In Australia, healthcare is responsible for 7% of national greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.

Aim

This study aimed to evaluate Australian healthcare workers' knowledge, current behaviours and perceived barriers related to improving healthcare sustainability.

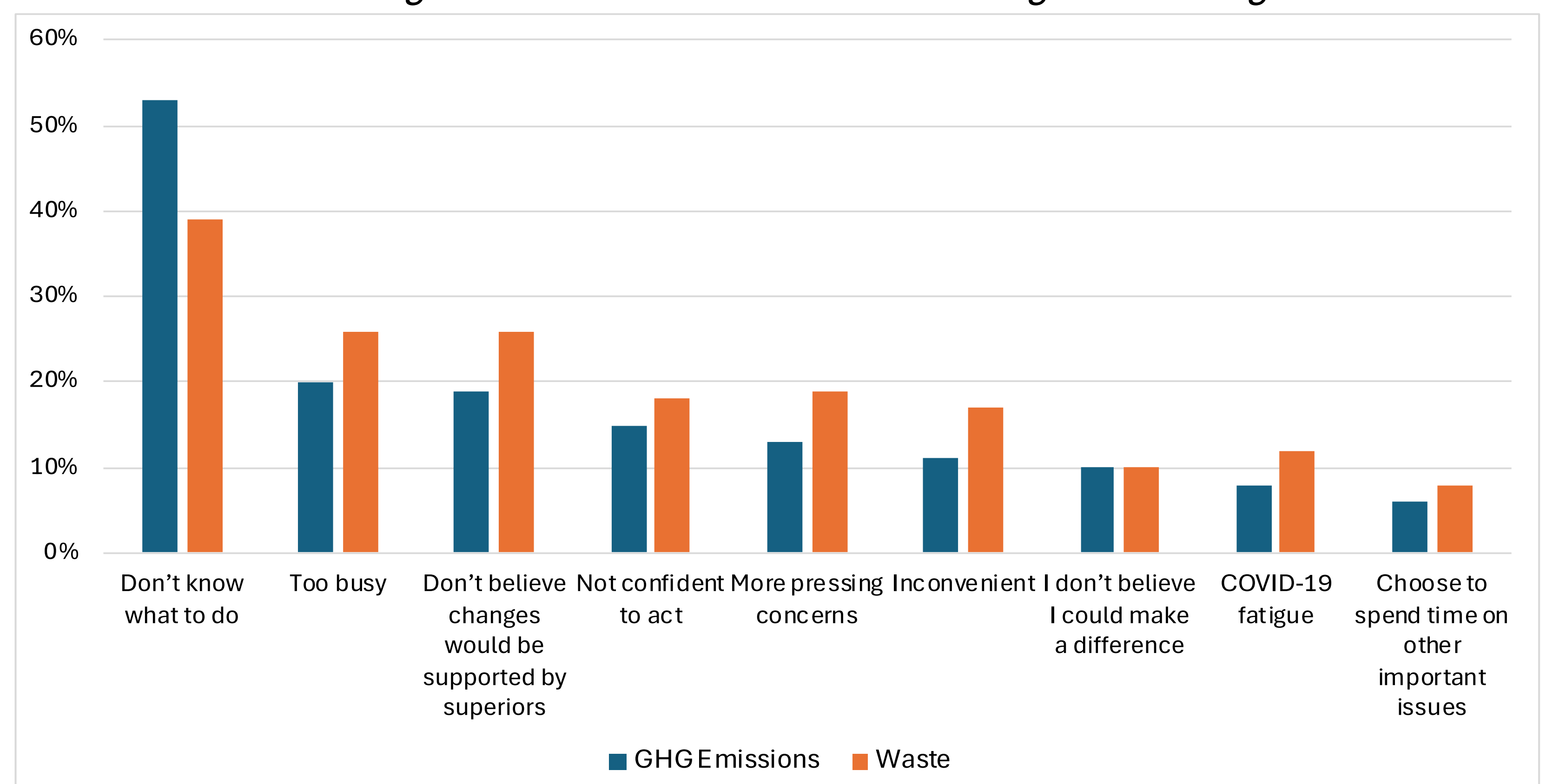
Method

From November 2023 to January 2024, we conducted an online cross-sectional survey of employees at 12 healthcare organisations within the Australian state of Victoria. All adult employees (including non-clinical staff) working at participating institutions at the time of the survey were considered eligible; students were excluded. Our survey included modified versions of the validated Climate Change Attitudes Survey and Climate and Health Tool, focusing on the domains of awareness, concern and behaviours at home and at work. We also assessed self-reported barriers to reducing healthcare-associated greenhouse gas emissions and waste, as well as perceived responsibility for action.

Results

We received 2,040 complete and eligible responses. Most respondents were women (1,559, 76%), working in metropolitan locations (1,787, 88%) and employed in the public sector (1,937, 95%). Overall, concern regarding climate change (mean score: 3.29; 5-point Likert scale from 0-4) was slightly higher than awareness (mean score: 3.09). Respondents reported taking fewer sustainability actions at work compared to their personal lives (mean score 2.09 versus 2.48, $p < 0.001$). The three most common barriers to reducing healthcare-associated waste and greenhouse gas emissions were identical: lack of knowledge (39% and 53%, respectively), busyness (26% and 20%) and perceived lack of support from superiors (26% and 19%).

Barriers to addressing healthcare-associated waste and greenhouse gas emissions



Conclusion

The perspectives of HCWs in our study provide strong evidence that this group is aware of the impacts of climate change and is willing to be engaged in more sustainable practices, but requires support to enact the substantive changes required to reduce healthcare's carbon footprint. Healthcare staff could benefit from greater institutional support, particularly with a focus on addressing key obstacles including insufficient knowledge (especially regarding GHG emissions), managing competing priorities and a perceived lack of workplace support.

Acknowledgement

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