International Journal of Education, Social Science & Humanities.
Finland Academic Research Science Publishers
ISSN: 2945-4492 (online) | (SJIF) = 8.09 Impact factor
Volume-14| Issue-2| 2026 Published: |22-02-2026|

INTEGRATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT PRINCIPLES INTO MEDICAL EDUCATION PROGRAMS FOR CANCER PREVENTION AND PUBLIC HEALTH PROMOTION: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18638493

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Abstract

Background: The global burden of cancer necessitates a paradigm shift towards prevention. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), and SDG 13 (Climate Action), provide a holistic framework for addressing the environmental, social, and economic determinants of health.

Aim: To develop and justify a conceptual model for integrating SDG principles into medical education, equipping future physicians with competencies in ecologically-oriented cancer prevention.

Methods: A systematic literature review (Scopus, PubMed, Google Scholar) was conducted using key terms: "sustainable development," "medical education," "cancer prevention," "health determinants," "interdisciplinary." Theoretical modeling of educational modules was employed.

Results: Key integration points were identified: 1) Epidemiology of environmentally-linked cancers (air pollution, carcinogens); 2) Planetary health and the role of climate change in altering risk factor distribution; 3) Economics of sustainable healthcare (screening, primary prevention); 4) Social determinants (inequity in access to prevention). A structure for an interdisciplinary educational module is proposed.

Conclusion: Integrating the SDGs into medical curricula is a strategic imperative. It prepares physicians to act not only as clinicians but as agents of systemic change, addressing cancer prevention at the population level through an interdisciplinary lens combining clinical medicine, ecology, economics, and sociology.

Keywords

sustainable development, medical education, cancer prevention, public health, interdisciplinary approach, health determinants, planetary health.

1. Introduction

The persistent and growing global burden of oncological diseases represents one of the most significant challenges to contemporary healthcare systems. While advancements in diagnostics and targeted therapies continue to evolve, primary prevention remains the most effective and cost-efficient strategy for reducing morbidity and mortality [1]. Traditional medical education paradigms, however, often maintain a predominant focus on curative, hospital-based care and individual behavioral risk factors, such as smoking or diet, addressed through patient counseling [2]. This approach overlooks the fundamental **social, environmental, and economic determinants of health** that underlie up to 70% of health outcomes, including cancer incidence [3]. Factors such as ambient air pollution, occupational exposure to carcinogens, climate change-induced shifts in disease patterns, and entrenched socioeconomic inequalities in access to healthy environments and screening programs are critical drivers of cancer risk that operate at a systemic level.

The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) offer a comprehensive, action-oriented framework perfectly aligned with this broader view of prevention. Several SDGs are directly pertinent to cancer prevention: SDG 3.4 (reducing premature mortality from non-communicable diseases), SDG 3.9 (reducing deaths from hazardous chemicals and pollution), SDG 13 (climate action, impacting carcinogen distribution and food security), and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) [4]. The concept of planetary health—which recognizes that the health of human civilizations is inextricably linked to the health of natural systems—provides a critical theoretical bridge between these goals and medical practice [5].

Addressing these complex, interwoven challenges requires moving beyond disciplinary silos. There is a pressing need to equip future physicians with an interdisciplinary mindset that integrates knowledge from ecology, economics, sociology, and public policy. This paper argues that the deliberate integration of SDG and planetary health principles into core medical curricula is a strategic imperative. The **aim** of this study is to develop a theoretically grounded model and provide practical recommendations for such integration, thereby enhancing the training of future physicians in population-level cancer prevention and the promotion of sustainable public health.

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2. Methods. This study employs a qualitative research design combining a systematic narrative review of literature with theoretical educational modeling. The methodological approach consisted of two primary phases.

Phase 1: Systematic Narrative Review. A comprehensive search of peer-reviewed literature was conducted in the Scopus, PubMed/MEDLINE, and Web of Science databases for publications between 2010 and 2024. Key search terms and their combinations included: "sustainable development goals," "medical education," "undergraduate medical curriculum," "cancer prevention," "environmental determinants of cancer," "planetary health," "interdisciplinary education," and "health disparities." Grey literature from authoritative organizations, including World Health Organization (WHO) reports, UN documents, and position papers from leading medical education bodies (e.g., Association of American Medical Colleges - AAMC, Association of Schools of Public Health in the European Region - ASPHER), was also analyzed. Included publications were those addressing: a) innovations in medical education content related to sustainability or public health; b) empirical or theoretical links between environmental/economic factors and cancer; c) conceptual frameworks for interdisciplinary health education. Thematic synthesis was used to identify recurrent themes, gaps in current educational practices, and potential leverage points for curriculum integration.

Phase 2: Theoretical Modeling. Based on the synthesized findings, a conceptual model for an interdisciplinary educational module was constructed. The model development followed an iterative process, defining core competencies, learning objectives, thematic content blocks, appropriate pedagogical strategies, and potential assessment methods. This model is intended to serve as a foundational blueprint for curriculum developers and faculty.

3. Results

The literature review confirmed a significant gap in the systematic integration of SDG and planetary health principles into standard oncology and public health training for medical students. However, robust evidence supports the relevance of each identified thematic area. The proposed interdisciplinary module, "Sustainable Health and Cancer Prevention," is structured around four core thematic pillars, each with defined learning objectives and interdisciplinary links.

Table 1. Structure of the Interdisciplinary Module "Sustainable Health and Cancer Prevention"

Thematic Pillar	Core Learning Objectives	Key Content Examples	Interdisciplinary Links

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Thematic Pillar	Core Learning Objectives	Key Content Examples	Interdisciplinary Links
1. Ecology & Carcinogenesis	Explain pathways linking environmental exposures to oncogenesis. Identify major environmental carcinogens in local/global context.	PM2.5/air pollution and lung cancer; pesticides, heavy metals (As, Cd) in food/water; UV radiation and melanoma; industrial & occupational hazards (asbestos, benzene).	Medicine, Environmental Science, Toxicology, Chemistry
2. Planetary Health & Systemic Risk	Analyze how climate change and ecosystem degradation indirectly influence cancer risk factors.	Climate change & geographic shift of infectious agents linked to cancer (HPV, *H. pylori*, viral hepatitis); impact on food systems and nutritional quality; extreme weather events disrupting healthcare access.	Medicine, Climatology, Geography, Global Health
3. Economics of Sustainable Prevention	Compare cost-effectiveness of primary prevention vs. treatment. Evaluate the economic burden of environmentally-attributable cancers.	Life-cycle analysis of prevention programs; business case for "green hospitals" and sustainable procurement; economic metrics like Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) saved.	Medicine, Health Economics, Healthcare Management
4. Social Justice & Equity in Prevention	Critique how social determinants create inequalities in cancer risk and outcomes. Design inclusive prevention strategies.	Equity in access to screening, healthy food, clean environments, and safe work; cultural competency in health communication; addressing biases in healthcare delivery.	Medicine, Sociology, Medical Ethics, Public Health

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Proposed Pedagogy & Assessment: The module should employ active, student-centered learning methods. These include:

- **Case-Based Learning:** Analyzing real-world scenarios (e.g., "Elevated childhood leukemia rates in an industrial region").
- **Interdisciplinary Group Projects:** Developing a cancer prevention plan for a specific community, considering environmental, economic, and social data.
- **Structured Debates:** Discussing policy dilemmas (e.g., "Economic development vs. environmental regulation").
- **Assessment:** Evaluation through a group project portfolio, a reflective essay on the physician's role in sustainable health, and/or a case-based exam testing systems-thinking skills.

4. Discussion

The proposed model represents a necessary evolution in medical education, aligning it with 21st-century health challenges. Its core contribution lies in reframing the physician's role from a primarily reactive clinician to a proactive health promoter and system-level advocate, equipped to understand and address the root causes of disease [6]. This aligns with the evolving concept of the "physician-citizen" who engages with societal and environmental issues impacting health.

The **novelty** of this approach is its systematic integration of sustainability science into clinical oncology and preventive medicine training. It moves beyond merely adding content, towards fostering a systems-thinking competency that allows future doctors to see connections between planetary boundaries, socioeconomic structures, and individual patient health. For instance, understanding the link between fossil fuel combustion (SDG 13), air pollution (SDG 3.9), and lung cancer incidence (SDG 3.4) empowers a physician to advocate for both clinical screening and broader public health policies.

Practical Implications and Challenges.

For **educational institutions**, adopting this model requires committed leadership, faculty development programs, and strategic partnerships with departments of environmental science, economics, and social sciences. It may be integrated into existing courses on public health, oncology, or as a dedicated transversal module.

For **healthcare systems**, graduates with this training can drive the transition towards more sustainable, preventive, and equitable models of care, potentially reducing long-term costs.

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The main **barriers** include already overcrowded curricula, lack of faculty expertise, and the perceived distance of topics like climate science from daily clinical practice. A phased integration, starting with pilot modules and leveraging digital resources from established planetary health education consortia, is a recommended strategy.

Study Limitations. This work presents a theoretical model requiring empirical validation. Future research must pilot such modules and conduct longitudinal studies to assess their impact on student competencies, attitudes, and ultimately, on their professional practice and advocacy. Qualitative studies exploring faculty and student perceptions of this integration are also needed.

Conclusions and Recommendations.

Integrating the principles of sustainable development and planetary health into medical education is no longer an optional addition but a fundamental requirement for preparing a resilient healthcare workforce. The interdisciplinary model presented here provides a concrete framework for empowering future physicians to become effective agents in cancer prevention at the population level. Key implementation steps include:

1. **Curriculum Reform:** Incorporating SDG-related competencies into national medical education standards.
2. **Faculty Development:** Creating training programs and resources for current educators.
3. **Partnership Building:** Fostering collaboration between medical schools, environmental research institutes, and public health agencies.
4. **Student Engagement:** Involving medical students in curriculum co-design and sustainability initiatives within their academic hospitals.

By embracing this interdisciplinary approach, medical education can fulfill its societal contract to protect and promote health in its broadest sense, safeguarding both current and future generations.

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