



THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND HEALTH

Australian Medical Council

The relationship between the climate crisis and health

The climate crisis has catalyzed a health crisis, and therefore warrants urgent action by healthcare professionals and organizations (1, 2). Climate change associated events such as bushfires, floods, coral bleaching, rising sea levels and heatwaves have significant population level physical and mental health consequences and exacerbate existing inequities (1-6). For example, extreme weather events have been associated with increased mortality and morbidity, psychological trauma, loss of livelihood, poverty, forced migration, social unrest, vector borne illness, food and water insecurity (5-12). Sequelae associated with floods, bushfires, air pollution, drought, and extreme temperature include depression, anxiety, PTSD, substance misuse and suicide (13-15).

The effects of the climate crisis highlight the reciprocal connections between biodiversity, ecosystems, human existence, and human welfare. For example, extreme weather events increase demand for healthcare, while concurrently compromising access to healthcare, infrastructure, and the function of health and social systems (10, 16). Extreme weather events also threaten plant and animal species whose existence is inextricably linked with all other life on earth, including human life (2, 17).

Conversely, preserving and increasing biodiverse, unpolluted green and blue spaces carries significant physical and mental health benefits for communities, patients, and their families (17).

The health of Indigenous people and the climate crisis

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, and Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand have strong cultural and spiritual connections to Country, land, waters, and ecosystems (18, 19). Thus, the health, wellbeing and identity of Indigenous peoples are coterminous with the sustainability of the natural environment. Climate change is already having a disproportionate impact on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and Māori peoples by disrupting cultural and spiritual connections to Country, destroying cultural landmarks, intensifying food insecurity and exacerbating existing levels of health inequity (20, 21). Globally, Indigenous people are suffering disproportionately from the adverse effects of the climate crisis (4, 22).

Indigenous peoples have a long history of respectful, adaptable, and sustainable environmental stewardship, rights, and responsibilities (19, 22, 23). Thus, it is essential to acknowledge and uphold the self-determination of Indigenous peoples alongside the cultural knowledge and expertise that Indigenous peoples can contribute to effective climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies (19, 24).

The contribution of health services to the climate crisis

In Australia, health care produces 7% of the country's carbon emissions (25). The major contributors to carbon emissions in healthcare include public hospitals, private hospitals, medications, benefit-paid medications, and capital expenditures for buildings (25).

The contribution of medical education to the climate crisis

Climate change and sustainable health care provision care are not routinely included in medical curricula (26-28). However, integration of climate and health competencies into medical education, health professional curricula and continuing professional development are essential for preparing health

professionals to provide sustainable healthcare and to mitigate, respond to and adapt to impacts of the climate crisis (28-30).

Australian Medical Council commitments

The AMC recognises the importance of the climate crisis, its impacts on health, and the disproportionate burden faced by Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori peoples.

The AMC acknowledges the importance of connection to Country and land, and the cultural wisdom of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori peoples.

The AMC is committed to appropriately attributing and protecting the cultural wisdom of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori peoples.

The AMC is committed to building respectful partnerships with Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander and Māori peoples to share wisdom about climate change adaptation and mitigation.

The AMC is committed to reviewing and amending its business practices to respond effectively to climate change and to enhance sustainability.

The AMC is committed to advocating for further climate change adaptation and mitigation action.

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