



As G20 gets underway, leading health bodies declare Australia's reliance on coal dangerous for health

November 14, 2014: Prominent health organisations from across Australia today condemned Australia's reliance on coal citing a growing, and significant body of research documenting severe health effects.

"It is clear, in this day and age, that we should be phasing out coal. It is highly polluting and is causing disastrous health impacts in communities across Australia. As health professionals it is our duty to highlight these health risks for Australians and suggest better alternatives," Michael Moore, CEO of the Public Health Association of Australia said.

"As Australia's largest health union, we are concerned about the serious threat the fossil fuel sector poses to the Australian community. It is time that Governments acknowledge the concerns of health and community stakeholders like the ANMF and work with us to find healthier, more sustainable forms of energy," Lee Thomas, Secretary of the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation said.

The groups together released a ***Position Paper on Health and Energy Choices*** spelling out particular concerns about fossil fuels, pointing to strong evidence they cause harm to health, fuelling dangerous climate change, and must be phased out urgently in favour of safer, healthier, renewable energy sources.

"Too often the health of the community is put last in decisions about energy. Politicians must put the community first and rapidly phase out harmful coal and phase in alternative energy sources that are healthier and safer, such as solar and wind power", Mr Moore said.

The health groups include: the ***Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA), Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF), National Toxics Network (NTN), Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health (SARRAH), Australian Medical Students Association (AMSA), Women's Health East (WHE)*** and the umbrella organisation the ***Climate and Health Alliance (CHA)***.

They have produced a series of recommendations for governments, industry, the health sector and the community – spelling out the steps that must be taken to minimise threats to health from current energy choices.

The Health and Energy Choices Position Paper is available at
www.caha.org.au/projects/healthy-energy

The Position Paper states:

“Governments, business and industry, the community, and the health sector all have a responsibility to respond to minimise these threats to health. The Australian community must urgently reconsider its energy choices. Safer, healthier, affordable and sustainable choices exist now. To protect community health and wellbeing, social cohesion, the economy and the environment, these should be substituted for fossil fuel energy resources.”

Current energy policy in Australia poses a serious and increasing risk to the health of individuals, families and communities, as well as to the nation as a whole, according to the paper released.

The paper’s key messages are that:

- *The mining, transportation and burning of fossil fuels such as coal and petroleum products have significant and under recognised detrimental effects of people’s health from air, soil and water pollution, and contribute to cardiovascular, respiratory, neurological, reproductive, endocrine and kidney disorders.*
- *Decisions about energy choices in Australia are being made on the basis of inaccurate assessments of costs and benefits, with economic benefits frequently overstated and costs to health, environment and other industries overlooked or ignored.*
- *Continuing to develop Australian fossil fuel resources such as coal and gas threatens to push global temperatures beyond the limit agreed by the world in 2009 of two degrees Celsius above preindustrial levels. Climate scientists warn however that even this level of warming may “cause large climate change with disastrous consequences” for humans and other species.¹*
- *The health and medical community have a responsibility to intervene in public policy decision-making where health is at risk – and current energy policy in Australia constitutes a serious risk.*
- *The Australian community, politicians and policymakers must urgently reconsider our energy choices.*
- *Safer, healthier choices are available and affordable. To protect community health and wellbeing, social cohesion, the economy and the environment, and these must be substituted for fossil fuel energy resources as rapidly as possible.*

An accompanying **Background Paper** provides an overview of the health and medical literature in relation to the health implications associated with different energy choices.

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¹ Hansen J, Kharecha P, Sato M, Masson-Delmotte V, Ackerman F, et al. (2013) Assessing “Dangerous Climate Change”: Required Reduction of Carbon Emissions to Protect Young People, Future Generations and Nature. *PLoS ONE* 8(12): e81648. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0081648. Available at <http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0081648>

Quotes from health and medical leaders on Health and Energy Choices:

Dr Liz Hanna, Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) President

“The health of the community is our greatest asset. It is time Australians insisted that the external damages associated with fossil fuels were reflected in the choices we make about energy, and in the prices associated with energy supply. Fossil fuels are not cheap – they are enormously costly due to health and environmental damage, and are responsible for increasingly dangerous changes to the global climate.”

Michael Moore, CEO, Public Health Association of Australia

“The sources of energy we choose to power our economy affect the ecological and social factors which determine our community’s health now, and into the future. Whether we are talking about the heart and lung disease in people living near coal mines, or the longer term effects from global warming on heatwaves and food production, these factors need to be taken into account by those making decisions about energy policy in Australia, and around the world.”

Lee Thomas, Federal Secretary, Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation

“As Australia’s largest health union, we are concerned about the serious threat the fossil fuel sector poses to the Australian community,” ANMF Federal Secretary, Lee Thomas, said.

“Australia’s policymakers must realize that our traditional energy sources are impacting human health and contributing to climate change overall. It is time that Governments acknowledge the concerns of health and community stakeholders like the ANMF and work with us to find healthier, sustainable forms of energy – for the health of all Australians now and in the future.”

Rod Wellington, CEO, Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health

“Over recent years world experts have concluded climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century. The seven million people who live in rural and remote Australia have a vested interest in climate change with many exposed to the negative effects of climate variations. Governments, both in Australia and globally, should respond to reduce the adverse health effects on people and the environment by reducing greenhouse gas emissions and supporting the expansion of the renewable energy industry.”

Mariann Lloyd-Smith, Senior Advisor, National Toxics Network

“In the rush to export Australia’s coal seam gas to Asia, governments care little about the climate-damaging methane and volatile pollutants escaping from gas wells and their infrastructure. Families forced to live adjacent to the gas-fields report serious health impacts, particularly in the children, and while some have now been bought out by the gas company, many more are forced to live with exposure to increasing air pollution, contaminated water and radioactive substances.”

Jessica Dean, President, Australian Medical Students Association

“The combustion of fossil fuels and climate change are affecting the health of communities and will continue to do so at a greater extent if we do not take strong action. As medical students studying today, we will be the doctors dealing with the health consequences of the energy choices made now. To safeguard the health of current and future generations of Australians, we must continue to increase our use of renewable energy and reduce our reliance on fossil fuels.”

Kristine Olaris, CEO, Women’s Health East

“At Women’s Health East we are greatly concerned about the impacts of our energy choices on the health and wellbeing of women, and of our community as a whole. The evidence is clear. It is time to urgently stop our reliance on fossil fuels, to minimise the many risks to our health and prevent further climate change. Australia has an abundance of renewable energy options. We need to take advantage of these now, for our health and that of future generations.”