

Joint Statement on Recognising Climate Change in the National Preventive Health Strategy

23 September 2020

The undersigned organisations call on the Health Minister to recognise climate change in the National Preventive Health Strategy, currently in development.

Climate change must be a central feature of any broad national health strategy. The World Health Organization has described climate change as the defining issue for public health in the 21st century, and it poses significant immediate, medium-term and long-term risks to the health of Australians and communities around the world.

Climate change affects health in many ways: directly by the increased intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as prolonged heatwaves, floods and bushfires; and indirectly through worsening air quality, changes in the spread of infectious diseases, risks to food safety and drinking water quality, and effects on mental health.

Climate change is increasing the global burden of disease and if no action is taken, **is predicted to lead to 85 deaths per 100,000 people globally per year by the end of the century - more than are currently killed by all infectious diseases across the globe.**¹ The negative health impacts of climate change range from impacts on every human organ system, to disruption of the healthcare supply chain, damage to health infrastructure and threats to the safety and quality of care.²

New research from the University of Melbourne reveals annual economic damages by 2038 will be comparable to the current estimated annual cost of COVID-19 in Australia. Over the next 30 years, increasing economic damages from climate change will cost the Australian economy at least \$1.89 trillion – or roughly 4 per cent of projected GDP each year – if current emissions policies are maintained.³

Without dramatic and urgent action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, the health impacts of climate change will escalate and lead to an existential crisis for human civilisation.

Addressing the health impacts of climate change through mitigation and adaptation strategies is one of the World Health Organization's top priorities - aimed at preventing the deaths of around 12.6 million people who die each year as a result of living or working in an unhealthy environment.

The profound nature and scale of the impacts from climate change mean that climate action is the best opportunity we have this decade to promote human health and well-being.

¹ Carleton, Tamma and Jina, Amir and Delgado, Michael and Greenstone, Michael and Houser, Trevor and Hsiang, Solomon and Hultgren, Andrew and Kopp, Robert E. and McCusker, Kelly and Nath, Ishan and Rising, James and Rode, Ashwin and Seo, Hee Kwon and and Viaene, Arvid and Yuan, Jiacan and Zhang, Alice Tianbo, Valuing the Global Mortality Consequences of Climate Change Accounting for Adaptation Costs and Benefits (Aug. 3, 2020). National Bureau of Economics Working Paper No. 27599, Available at NBER: <http://www.nber.org/papers/w27599>

² <https://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe1909957>

³ https://thenewdaily.com.au/news/national/2020/09/10/economic-cost-climate-change/?fbclid=IwAR1nsLISpbH4A6Lbk0Fcn4M-tkE2PFuiJSCbsA7M4jyyAQHJTWIAp5uZi_w

Preventing deaths, illnesses and injuries associated with climate change requires leadership from governments to tackle the root causes of climate change, support the health sector and the health professions to build climate resilience, and ensure the community is well informed and capable of taking health protective actions.

The goal of the National Preventive Health Strategy should be to tackle the systems that undermine positive health and wellbeing. These include social, environmental, commercial and political determinants of health. As with unhealthy food, pharmaceuticals, tobacco, and alcohol, it is critical that the role of vested interests in relation to climate change is identified as undermining efforts to prevent illness and promote health and wellbeing. In addition to investment in a skilled workforce and systems to deliver positive outcomes, this must be addressed as part of the National Preventive Health Strategy.

A National Preventive Health Strategy that is fit for purpose in the 21st century must address climate change - or it will fail in its objectives.

Background to this Joint Statement

The recommendations in the Joint Statement are consistent with the well documented evidence in medical and health literature. Analysis of global and national action on climate change and health in the international medical journal *The Lancet*, for example, makes plain the life of every child born today will be profoundly affected by climate change, with populations around the world increasingly facing extremes of weather, food and water insecurity, changing patterns of infectious disease, and a less certain future. This research also makes clear that efforts to limit global average temperature rise could yield enormous health dividends for the public and the economy, and lead to cleaner air, safer cities, and healthier diets.⁴

The recommendations in this Joint Statement are consistent with international frameworks Australia is a signatory to, including the Sustainable Development Goals,⁵ in which Good Health and Wellbeing and Climate Action are both recognised as key goals; and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights in which everyone in Australia has the right to the highest attainable standards for physical and mental health.⁶

It is consistent with policy at the state and territory level. For example, in Victoria, the Public Health and Wellbeing Plan 2019-2023 recognises that climate change is a leading threat to health and wellbeing; in Qld, the Human Health and Wellbeing Climate Adaptation Plan emphasises the need to consider specific vulnerabilities in the population to climate change and implement measures to reduce avoidable morbidity and mortality. In WA, Climate-Health Inquiry has reviewed the planning and response capacity of the health system in relation to the health impacts of climate change, and a forthcoming report will make recommendations with respect to climate change mitigation and public health adaptation strategies. In Tasmania, a Climate Change Health Impact and Risk Assessment Tool to support evaluation of the health impacts of climate change has been piloted. In NT, the Department of Health has established a Climate Change Health Advisory Group (CCHAG) to help focus departmental efforts on climate change.

⁴ Watts, N. et al, Lancet Countdown, www.thelancet.com Vol 394 November 16, 2019.

⁵ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/memberstates/australia>

⁶ The 'right to health' as outlined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Australia is a party, refers to "the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health." See: <https://www.ag.gov.au/RightsAndProtections/HumanRights/Human-rights-scrutiny/PublicSectorGuidanceSheets/Pages/Righttohealth.aspx> It also includes (as outlined in the World Health Organization Constitution which Australia has ratified) "a system of health protection that gives everyone an equal opportunity to enjoy the highest attainable level of health." See: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs323/en/>

While these initiatives at the sub-national level are important, this is occurring in the absence of an overarching policy directive at the federal level. Leadership and action at the national level from the Commonwealth Government is vital.

This statement is signed by:

