

MEDIA RELEASE

Protect health and save lives: Open letter calls on every federal parliamentary candidate to address climate health emergency

“Climate change poses an unprecedented threat to the health of people in Australia and across the world.”



AN OPEN LETTER from an unprecedented coalition of health, welfare, and environment groups published today calls for all candidates in the upcoming federal election to recognise climate change as a core public health threat and commit to supporting policy to respond.

The letter cites the World Health Organization which has declared climate change a “health emergency”¹, and the prestigious international medical journal *The Lancet* which considers climate change “the greatest threat to health of the 21st century”.² It is signed by 50 organisations, including the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, the Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association, the Public Health Association of Australia, the Australian Council of Social Service, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians, the Australian Marine Conservation Society and Greenpeace.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/nov/28/climate-change-already-a-health-emergency-say-experts>

² Watts, N. et al, The 2018 report of the *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: shaping the health of nations for centuries to come. Available at: [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(18\)32594-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(18)32594-7/fulltext)

Coordinating the letter is the health coalition **Climate and Health Alliance**, whose **Executive Director Fiona Armstrong** said: “These calls are backed by several decades of national and global scientific evidence, and the direct experience of hundreds of thousands of people around the world. We have already seen hundreds of thousands of deaths directly linked to the impacts of climate change. We must have urgent action to protect the people of Australia from further harm.”

Australian Council of Social Service Senior Advisor Climate and Energy Kellie Caught said people experiencing poverty and disadvantage were most at risk. “There are more than 3 million people living in poverty in Australia³ and they are particularly vulnerable to climate-related extreme weather events such as fires, floods and heatwaves because they do not have the resource to cope, adapt and recover. We need all political parties to commit to rapidly transition to a clean economy, with appropriate safeguards for people on low incomes, and help people adapt to the climate change impacts already locked in.”

Professor of Planetary Health at the University of Sydney, Tony Capon, said: “A recent global study published in *The Lancet* stated climate change poses an ‘unacceptably high level of risk for the current and future health of populations across the world’. It revealed a failure to reduce emissions threatens human lives and the viability of the health systems we all depend on. It is vital that climate change is recognised by policymakers as a core public health threat and responded to as the emergency it is.”

A recent paper published by the *Medical Journal of Australia* declared Australian inaction on climate change is threatening human lives and urged Australia to invest in the transition towards clean energy and transport to deliver longer term climate benefits, as well as substantial near-term benefits for health (e.g. from reduced air pollution).⁴

Public Health Association of Australia CEO Terry Slevin said: “It doesn’t matter how healthy or fit you are, unless we have viable ecosystems to provide the essential services on which humans depend – clean air, soil and water, access to shelter – nothing else matters. Climate change threatens all of the ecological and social determinants of health and well-being. We have to ensure that policies at every level of government are in place to reverse our current trajectory on climate change – our health (and the health of future generations) depends on it.”

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation Secretary Annie Butler said: “Nurses, midwives and personal care workers care for Australians at their most vulnerable. We are already witnessing the negative health impacts of climate change on people’s health. We are concerned about the current government’s failure to take effective and comprehensive action on climate change. We know that inaction is having serious consequences for people’s health and is placing pressure on the workforce and on the health budget. We are running out of time to avoid the worst

³ ACOSS and UNSW (2018) Poverty in Australia 2018 https://www.acoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/ACOSS_Poverty-in-Australia-Report_Web-Final.pdf

⁴ Zhang, Y. et al. The MJA Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: Australian policy inaction threatens lives. Available at: https://www.mja.com.au/system/files/issues/209_11/10.5694mja18.00789.pdf

impacts of climate change - we need all political parties to commit to strong policy action now to address this growing risk to our health.”

Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association CEO Alison Verhoeven said: “The health sector is at the forefront of climate action when providing care for Australians during extreme weather events and responding to new or redistributed diseases. The health sector can also be a leader and reduce its carbon footprint, but government stewardship and funding are critical.”

President of the Australasian Australian College for Emergency Medicine Dr Simon Judkins said: “Our Emergency Departments are on the front line of any health issues which impact our communities. We are gravely concerned about the current impacts of climate change and the associated increase in climate events, the fires, floods and storms, affecting the health of Australians, as well as the “slow-burn” changes: the impacts of drought, changes in disease vectors and mental health impacts on people whose lives can be changed forever. We are also very concerned about the capacity of our health systems to manage these current and looming crises unless there is urgent action.”

Greenpeace CEO David Ritter said: “We stand alongside the health and medical community in calling for action on climate change as a health issue. There are only upsides to addressing air pollution from coal and transport, for instance – fewer health problems across the community, our kids growing up stronger and healthier, and the slowing of global warming.”

Australian Conservation Foundation Kelly O’Shanassy said: “Australians are already experiencing climate change damage through record-breaking heatwaves, droughts, bushfires and floods, which are getting worse as we continue to burn coal and create other pollution. These extreme events harm the health and wellbeing of Australians and there is clear evidence the young, elderly and pregnant are most at risk. We also know the solutions to climate change will be a win for public health. Clean energy and electric cars will mean cleaner air and less smog choking our cities and towns. All parliamentary candidates and political parties need to know Australians care about the air we breathe, the water we drink and the climate we leave to our kids.”

The full version of the Open Letter is available here: <http://bit.ly/2GnslAD>

Media Contact: Romy Stephens 0434 908 186 romy@climatemediacentre.org.au
OR Vaidehi Shah 0452 290 082 vai@climatemediacentre.org.au