Australian health care sector second highest greenhouse gas emitter per capita, new report finds

Australia's health care sector is the second highest emitter of greenhouse gases per capita, according to *Health care's climate footprint: How the health sector contributes to the global climate crisis and opportunities for action*, a new report by Health Care Without Harm (HCWH).

The report also finds that, if the global health care sector were a country, it would be the fifth-largest greenhouse gas emitter on the planet.

Establishing the first-ever estimate of health care's global climate footprint, the report finds health care's footprint is equivalent to 4.4% of global net emissions (2 gigatons of carbon dioxide equivalent).

Every nation's health sector directly and indirectly releases greenhouse gases as it delivers care, with fossil fuel combustion making up well over half of health care's global climate footprint. Overall, health care emissions are equivalent to the annual greenhouse gases produced by 514 coal-fired power plants.

The report makes the case for a transformation of the health care sector to align it with the Paris Agreement goal of limiting climate change to 1.5 degrees Celsius.

"Doctors, nurses and health facilities are all first responders to the health impacts of climate change, but hospitals and health care systems paradoxically make a major contribution to the climate crisis," said Josh Karliner, International Director of Program and Strategy for Health Care Without Harm and one of the authors of the report.

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director General of the World Health Organization, said: "Health sector facilities are the operational heart of service delivery, protecting health, treating patients, and saving lives. Yet health sector facilities are also a source of carbon emissions, contributing to climate change. Places of healing should be leading the way, not contributing to the burden of disease."

"The role of the health sector is a critical one in addressing the climate crisis. The healthcare sector in Australia is responsible for 7 per cent of our total national emissions, which is more than the waste sector, and more than industrial processes," said Fiona Armstrong, Executive Director of Australia's Climate and Health Alliance, HCWH's strategic partner in Australia.

"The health sector needs to rapidly transition to a net zero emissions pathway. Climate change poses a serious threat to human health in Australia and around the world.

"Many hospitals and health services around Australia are beginning to step up to the challenge voluntarily as members of the Australasian Green and Healthy Hospitals network (GGHH-Pacific), but lack supportive policy to really accelerate low carbon initiatives."

One member of GGHH-Pacific winning recognition for its efforts includes health network UnitingCare QLD, which recently won a global Health Care Climate Challenge award for reducing its carbon footprint by 4 per cent on 2017 levels. This has been achieved by installing 167kW of solar (generating 415,000kWh per year), energy efficiency upgrades, and transformation of their passenger fleet to smaller and more eco-friendly vehicles (avoiding 1,000 tCO2e per year).

The report calls for a global roadmap for climate-smart health care in order to reduce emissions, while meeting goals such as universal health coverage. The report also outlines immediate actions that stakeholders should take, including:

- National and subnational governments should develop and implement action plans to decarbonise their health systems and foster climate resilience, and in so doing, improve health outcomes.
- The healthcare sector needs to adopt strategies to reduce healthcare's climate footprint, drawing on the lessons of the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network.
- The health sector needs to advocate for a rapid phase out of fossil fuels, and a pathway for net zero emissions by 2050 to avoid local pollution and adverse health impacts from climate change.

The report concludes that health promotion, disease prevention, universal health coverage, and the global climate goal of net zero emissions must become intertwined.

For more information about the report, visit noharm.org/ClimateFootprintReport.

Australia-specific facts from the report

- Second top healthcare emitter per capita.
- Although Australia ranks 17th in the total emissions per country list, its health care system ranks 10th in the health care emissions per country list.

About Climate and Health Alliance & Health Care Without Harm

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) is the leading peak body for climate change and health in Australia. CAHA coordinates the Australia and New Zealand network of the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network, an initiative of its international partner Health Care Without Harm, which works to transform the health sector worldwide without compromising patient safety or care so that it becomes ecologically sustainable and a leading advocate for environmental health and justice.