

# Climate, Health & Well-being

## Online Discussion Forum

### Summary of Themes

August 2016

#### **About**

The Climate, Health and Well-being Online Discussion Forum held over a nine-day period via the paxrepublic.com platform, which uses interactive technology to connect people and ideas across geographic boundaries.

This Forum offered participants the opportunity to come together to discuss the ideas proposed in the [Discussion Paper: Towards a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia](#).

The Online Forum had 118 registrations with 42 active participants. The questions posed in the Forum to prompt conversation included:

- What should the federal government be doing to protect and promote people's health in the context of climate mitigation (i.e. through strategies to prevent further climate change)?
- What's needed in the National Strategy to identify and protect vulnerable communities from climate change?
- What policies do we need to drive the low carbon transition in the health sector in ways that optimise and promote health and well-being?
- What are the key elements of a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being?
- Are the key themes identified in the Discussion Paper the right ones?
- What do we need to do to make a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being a reality?

The key themes emerging from the discussion are summarised below:

#### **Leadership**

Participants were in consensus that the federal government needs to provide leadership across climate change and health and take action urgently to protect and promote people's health. They noted political will and bipartisan support will be essential to securing and maintaining the necessary governance, funding, policy, infrastructure and resources required long term, to address climate change and associated impacts on the health and wellbeing of the community.

#### **Governance**

The need for leadership and coordination at the federal level was argued, with governance arrangements independent of any single agency. This was seen as necessary to facilitate the necessary partnerships for a whole of government approach resulting in shared action, research, participation and responsibility across multiple levels, sectors and jurisdictions.

#### **Legislation**

Legislation was raised by participants, in particular the lack of it at the federal and local government level for coordinated and effective action on climate change. Legislation that protects and enhances people's health and wellbeing was advocated, noting some legislation may have the reverse effect.

## **Funding and infrastructure**

Funding was raised frequently in the discussion, related to governance, leadership, research, initiatives and campaigns. The negative impact of reduced funding at the federal level in environmental health was noted, with consequent diminished capacity, coordination and leadership on climate change action. Participants called for an immediate stop to government subsidies to the fossil fuel industry, a reinvestment of these resources to climate change mitigation strategies and the ultimate phasing out of fossil fuels extraction and production.

## **National strategy or framework**

Participants discussed the need for a national strategy or framework to provide a clear roadmap or plan of action detailing the policies, actions, timelines, targets and responsibilities required at multiple levels and sectors of government to achieve zero net emissions in Australia to maximise positive health outcomes. The urgency in doing so was highlighted, with evidence of a short window of opportunity in which to reduce emissions and avoid pervasive health impacts and catastrophic and irreversible climate change. They noted the need for consistency across sectors to demonstrate a clear national picture of action and progress, and within this, locally relevant resources and information.

## **Research**

The need for research was raised by many participants throughout the forum including:

- surveillance, monitoring and assessment of appropriate indicators to track progress towards the overall target for emissions reduction, enhance preparedness and inform long-term decisions on policy, infrastructure and utilities
- climate-health impact assessments to inform policy development and mitigation strategies, with a focus on vulnerable communities
- research demonstrating the health, economic and environmental benefits of climate change mitigation strategies
- translational research with collaboration between researchers and practitioners from multiple sectors.

## **Policy**

Participants recommended the development of policies across multiple levels and sectors of government that support energy-efficient technology and innovation and changes in attitudes, social norms and behaviours. Policies for sustainable food systems and healthcare, in particular carbon neutral policies were frequently discussed. Applying a climate and health lens to all government policies was recommended. National standards for healthcare procurement that mandate ethical and low carbon purchasing were called for, resulting in collective savings and power of purchasing.

## **Advocacy**

Advocacy was frequently discussed, to empower the community, health professionals, decision-makers and politicians to change social norms, create a powerful social movement advocating for climate action and a social license for politicians and policy makers to address climate change. They recommended advocacy efforts change the rhetoric around the impacts of climate change on the environment, to a broader focus on the predicted impacts on the economy, health, social and spiritual wellbeing, quality of life and standard of living.

## **Education, training and skill development**

The need to increase the climate literacy of the community, health professionals, policy makers and politicians was argued. Incorporating education of climate and health in existing health professional training was recommended, including conferences and university training. They also suggested advocacy training for health professionals to empower them to advocate for carbon neutral policies, initiatives and to raise the profile of sustainable health care. Transitional skill development for those working in the fossil fuel industry was also recommended to form part of mitigation strategies.

## **Learning from experience**

Participants discussed the need to draw on the information, tools and evidence, including examples of good practice, case studies and existing guidelines and tools. The opportunity to learn from international experience was discussed, often referencing the US Centers for Disease Control Climate and Health Program which has had success through informing surveillance, enhancing preparedness and building capacity of state and local health departments to contribute to long-term planning decisions.

Drawing on the strengths and experiences of health professionals was raised, with reference to public health successes in tobacco and communicable diseases efforts in Australia. The differences between these efforts and climate change efforts in Australia that could account for the comparative lack of success in tackling climate change were raised including funding, governance, legislation and a systems thinking approach.

*This report was prepared by Leonie Cranney*

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