



Climate change: A fishing boat in a lake in China's Hubei province dried out by a drought thought by some to be a consequence of global warming. Photo: REUTERS

For our health we must end fossil fuel dependency

George Laking

SOME people don't like doctors speaking out about things outside the "health sector", as some letter writers to *The Dominion Post* have made clear (May 11, 16, 18, 19).

But one of my tasks as a doctor is to advise about things that may seriously affect the future health of my patients and their families. Examples of this include advice on the environmental hazards of radiation, lead added to petrol, and second-hand tobacco smoke.

I don't raise such concerns lightly, because I have many other responsibilities, including the diagnosis and treatment of actual illness today. I also don't do this unless there is enough evidence, which is why I do not warn about cellphone radiation, measles vaccine, or fluoride in town water supplies.

In giving such advice, I often refer to other areas of science, such as physics, chemistry, and biology. I am qualified to do so because I have had a general scientific training at medical school. Also, much of my daily work includes scrutiny of claims for the effectiveness of treatments. I have had a lot of practice at spotting dud arguments.

The global climate is warming. The cause of this is human activity, mainly discharge of gases such as carbon dioxide and methane, and deforestation.

The data to support this include meteorological records, atmospheric chemistry, paleoclimatology, and geophysics. The scientific case for human-induced climate change is arguably stronger than that for most medicines, barring some exceptions such as antibiotics and insulin.

Climate change will have serious adverse effects on the health of present and future generations. Examples include weather such as storms and heatwaves, tropical diseases such as dengue fever and malaria, and

conflict over access to food and drinkable water.

These hazards are foreseen by doctors around the globe, and are a major focus of concern in our journals, colleges, and associations. We do not look forward to having to pick up the pieces.

When doctors comment on this kind of risk, you can expect a fair and impartial assessment. We are scrupulous about declaring our personal interests, where these may conflict with our advice.

We have often found that those who defend harmful practices do so from the standpoint of their own vested interests. Examples include the nuclear industry over reactor safety, the chemical industry over the safety of lead in petrol, and all activities of the tobacco industry.

ALTHOUGH some climate-change "sceptics" are just plain contrarian, most turn out to have a stake in fossil fuels. This includes the oil and coal industries, and, in New Zealand, fossil-fueled agriculture and transport.

New Zealand and the wider world are paralysed on climate change because fossil fuels are central to our current wealth. This state of economic wellbeing is illusory, once one realises the harm it will mean for future generations.

The best treatment is political action. Breaking the fossil-fuel habit now will be much less painful than the consequences of "business as usual". The best thing New Zealanders can do for the health of themselves and their children this year is make sure the party they vote for is serious about climate change.

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