



# Letter to the editor

Dear Colleagues

**C**limate change is a major global issue that all fellows are likely to be aware of and many will have views about, but is it something that that ought to concern surgeons from a professional point of view? The scientific consensus is increasingly clear about the anthropogenic factors contributing to climate change and the likely consequences of unmodified greenhouse gas emissions<sup>1</sup>. There is also compelling evidence of direct and indirect health consequences of climate change<sup>2</sup>. Health impacts can be categorised into primary (e.g. direct impact of floods, droughts, heat-waves and other extreme weather events), secondary (e.g. changing patterns of vector borne diseases) and tertiary (e.g. result of conflict and mass displacement of populations) and at least some of these are likely to impact directly on surgical practice. In addition, the health sector has its own substantial carbon footprint<sup>1,3-5</sup>.

On a positive note, major public health benefits are likely to accrue from climate friendly policies, such as more active transport, improved air quality, and better insulated houses. Furthermore the burgeoning cost of health care could be partially offset by improving the sustainability of hospitals and health care facilities<sup>6</sup>.

Doctors have a responsibility to advocate for improvements in public health and indeed this is endorsed by the RACS Code of Ethics. The recent Lancet commission on climate change and health report has identified climate changes as the biggest global health threat of the 21st century<sup>7</sup> and states; "The health community has a vital role to play in accelerating progress to tackle climate change...they must be leaders in responding to the health threat of climate change." and that, "The medical professions have decades of experience with attempts to induce mass changes of behaviour through health promotion. The most prominent campaigns have been targeted at alcohol consumption, smoking, diabetes and obesity." The report then describes the powerful experience of medical professions in the areas of protecting and promoting health that can help achieve effective climate policy.

The Association of Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland have also released a position statement concerning environmental sustainability and surgery<sup>8</sup>. This document

concludes "The NHS is one of the biggest carbon polluters in the UK. A similar scale of problem exists in ... much of the world." and advocates that "Every surgeon has a responsibility to the environment and should consider their own 'carbon footprint'." and that "Surgeons should consider environmental issues when appraising new technologies."

At a more local level the New Zealand Climate and Health Council (Ora Taiao) is an organization of New Zealand health professionals concerned about climate and health. The website ([www.orataiao.org.nz](http://www.orataiao.org.nz)) has a wealth of useful information and membership is welcomed from health professionals of any discipline.

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**OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate and Health Council**