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An advocate for climate change action

17 December 2019



Climate change is having an impact on everyone - which is why GPs need to get involved, have their voices heard and start making a difference now to prevent catastrophe in the future.

So says Dr Dermot Coffey, an executive member of OraTaiao, the NZ Climate and Health Council made up of health professionals which is part of a worldwide movement focusing on the health challenges climate change brings.

“This global issue is already causing health problems for many people, and will exacerbate the health inequalities we already experience in socially and economically disadvantaged communities,” he says. “As professionals whose lives are dedicated to the health and wellbeing of our patients, we have a responsibility to stand up and have our voices heard by those who can make the changes we need.

“The environment has the biggest impact on health and we see that day in and day out in our clinics. We often treat our patients knowing that the root problem actually lies outside the room, and so does the solution.

“We see a massive overlap with issues such as diet, social inequality and post-colonialism when we look at climate change and its only going to get worse if changes aren’t made on a global scale and soon.”

Dermot’s association with OraTaiao began a few years ago, after he and his family moved to New Zealand from County Kerry, Ireland, in 2002.

“All doctors take an oath that they will first and foremost ‘do no harm’ when it comes to caring for their patients and so ensuring they are not contributing to climate change can be seen as very much a part of that vow,” says Dermot.

He completed his GP training in Wellington after locum work showed him the benefits of a career where there was variety and opportunities to follow areas of interest.

Ironically, it was a move to Melbourne in 2016 that gave Dermot more time to be involved with OraTaiao and he became a member of the executive when he returned to live in Christchurch in 2018.

As a Fellow, Dermot is keen to see the College take a more proactive role in the drive to change the future.

“There are crucial things that need to happen in the next 10 or 20 years if we are to see long-term climate safety,” he says. “We have to do as much as we can to get people out of their cars and onto public transport, to push for change in the way we generate energy and to drive a move away from intensive farming methods.

“The College represents the largest group of doctors in the country so its kōrero will carry considerable weight where it matters.

“There is a long history of us advocating for our patients with the government, and climate change is an area where we can really make a difference for their futures, and those of generations to come.”

Dermot is adamant systemic change is what is needed, but says individuals can make a difference too by thinking carefully about the lifestyle choices they make.

Eating less meat, flying and driving less and being energy efficient are all ways to contribute. Investing money wisely is also something that few people consider.

“Check out how your money in your Kiwisaver is being invested,” advises Dermot. “Most people have no idea that they are helping to fund companies who are slowly destroying the planet. Ask questions, and ask some more. You can find ‘green’ Kiwisaver plans which are an excellent way of investing your money somewhere where it is going to do some good.”

GP clinics and practices can also look at ways of improving their environmental footprint by carrying out an emissions profile audit and implementing a carbon management scheme. Programmes offered by Toitū Envirocare, a subsidiary of the government-owned institute Landcare Research, provide the tools to do this.

“All doctors take an oath that they will first and foremost ‘do no harm’ when it comes to caring for their patients and so ensuring they are not contributing to climate change can be seen as very much a part of that vow,” says Dermot. “I would encourage anyone to join us at OraTaiao so we can make sure that what we have to say reaches the ears of those with the power to engineer change.”

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