

Climate and Health

The issue of 'climate change' has invoked impassioned public dialogue and generated significant media and social media attention, wide community discussion and political debate. Rural and remote doctors, like other Australians, have diverse opinions about: the causes of variations in weather patterns and trends; the degree to which adverse consequences (such as an increasing number of severe weather events, droughts, bushfires and floods) can be attributed to these variations; and to the use of the term 'climate change' as an all-encompassing concept.

In early 2020, the Rural Doctors Association of Australia (RDAA) conducted a survey to assess members' views on this issue. Almost three quarters of respondents indicated strong support for the development of an organisational policy position to reflect the concerns of rural and remote doctors. Sixty-seven per cent of respondents supported the use of the term 'climate change' as a descriptor together with references to adverse climatic/weather events and associated environmental impacts and disasters (including droughts, bushfires and floods) and to the physical, mental and social health impacts. Sixty-six per cent of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that climate change is the cause of a global health emergency and eighty-two per cent either strongly agreed or agreed that government must invest in infrastructure, and more robust systems to minimise the impact of climatic events on communities.

Position

- Climate change is an evolving threat to the health and well-being of rural and remote people and communities in Australia and globally.
- There is a need for urgent response by all levels of government to address both the causes and the consequences of climate change.
- Mitigating against the health impacts of changing weather patterns, adverse weather events, heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, floods and other disasters should be a key priority.
- A national climate and health strategy and implementation plan that includes tangible and targeted responses to adverse weather events and conditions should be developed immediately.
- Actions to support rural and remote people and communities must be a key priority and should include:
 - investing in training rural and remote doctors and other health professionals to ensure that they are equipped to respond to emergent health needs
 - developing a national register of suitably qualified medical practitioners who can be deployed in any part of Australia during emergencies and recovery periods

- integrating local rural and remote GPs and Rural Generalists in disaster management planning and response within their areas
- supporting rural and remote communities to develop local disaster management programs including for the mobilisation and coordination of local health care teams
- reviewing rural and remote health infrastructure to assess preparedness for disasters such as flood, fire, and cyclones and remedying any deficiencies
- investing in programs to support the biopsychosocial health and wellbeing of rural and remote people experiencing the impacts of climate change (for example, training and reskilling the agricultural workforce during extended periods of drought, to enable transition to post-farming careers)
- supporting rural and remote GPs and Rural Generalists to provide the necessary care, including mental health care, including by:
 - continuing and expanding support for the National Rural Generalist Pathway (the Pathway)
 - developing strategies to embed mental health advanced skill training (AST) in the Pathway and increase the numbers of doctors undertaking mental health AST
 - adopting the expanded telehealth model proposed by RDAAC in submissions to the Australian Government.

RDAAC also acknowledges its organisational responsibilities in relation to climate change and commits to:

- ensuring an environmental perspective informs the way in which the national office functions, including:
 - encouraging a re-use and recycle consciousness among staff
 - maintaining Australian Capital Territory's Actsmart Business Recycling accreditation
 - working to reduce paper consumption
 - considering environmental impacts in the planning of meetings and events and developing and implementing relevant strategies to mitigate against negative impacts
 - utilising carbon offset programs for essential air travel
- promoting and advocating for 'green' strategies to be adopted in rural health care settings, including general practices.

Conclusion

A national climate and health strategy must be developed and implemented as a matter of urgency to mitigate the health risks of climate change. Responding to the needs of rural and remote Australians must be a key priority in this strategy.

Background

Variations in climate patterns can have significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals, families and communities and on nations as a whole. Australia is already experiencing substantial impacts from climate change in a number of domains¹, including health. There is growing agreement that there is an evolving global health emergency caused by climate change^{2,3,4,5}.

Current and predicted impacts of climate change include the emergence and increasing prevalence of infectious diseases, air and water pollution, diminished food and water security, impaired occupational and mental health, social instability and conflict. These impacts will be most marked in vulnerable populations⁶. Climate change has also been recognised as a threat- or risk-multiplier that can exacerbate existing issues^{7,8,9}. It is predicted to have profound and long-lasting effects on the biopsychosocial determinants of health for Australians.

There is a considerable risk that these impacts will escalate and the health status of our nation will decline unless there is an increased and sustained level of national action to address the underlying causes and consequences of climate change. Action by all levels of government will be necessary.

The rising number of adverse weather events¹⁰, heatwaves, droughts, bushfires, floods and other disasters increases pressure on individuals, families and communities in rural and remote Australia, negatively affecting the socio-economic fabric of these areas and the physical and mental health of the people. This has significant implications for the planning and delivery of health services in the immediate and longer terms:

- Rural and remote areas are under-resourced for existing health demands and have diminished capacity to respond to any increased demand brought on by climate change.
- Isolation and decreased access to health care exacerbate the risk that the already poorer health outcomes of rural and remote people (as compared to more urban counterparts) will worsen as a result of climate change.

Rural and remote doctors and other health professionals play a key role in responding to the health and well-being challenges arising in rural and remote communities. They are on the frontline during and after disasters and are the primary providers of health care for people experiencing ongoing health consequences. They will require support to effectively respond to any increased demands.

¹ The 2019 report of the *MJA–Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: a turbulent year with mixed progress <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.5694/mja2.50405>. Viewed 19 November 2019

² <https://time.com/5672636/climate-change-public-health/> Viewed 19 November 2019

³ <https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/climate-emergency-declarations-cover-15-million-citizens/Viewed> 21 November 2019

⁴ <https://ama.com.au/media/climate-change-health-emergency> Viewed 19 November 2019

⁵ <https://croakey.org/doctors-take-to-the-streets-medical-colleges-declare-a-health-emergency-and-communities-suffer-climate-health-impacts/> Viewed 02 December 2019

⁶

https://d3n8a8pro7vhm.cloudfront.net/caha/pages/40/attachments/original/1476390215/CAHA_Discussion_Paper_v04.pdf?1476390215 Viewed 20 February 2020

⁷ <https://www.who.int/publications/10-year-review/health-guardian/en/> Viewed 11 March 2020

⁸ https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/pdf/National%20Security%20and%20the%20Threat%20of%20Climate%20Change.pdf Viewed 11 March 2020

⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/wcc.86> Viewed 11 March 2020

¹⁰ <https://www.climatechangeinaustralia.gov.au/en/climate-campus/climate-extremes/> Viewed 11 November 2019

Resources

Useful documents on the range of impacts of climate change on the health and wellbeing include:

Climate Health Alliance. June 2016. Towards a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being: Discussion Paper

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/caha/pages/40/attachments/original/1476390215/CA_HA_Discussion_Paper_v04.pdf?1476390215

Climate Health Alliance. September 2016. Towards a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being: Preliminary Report

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/caha/pages/40/attachments/original/1495787483/CA_HA_Survey_quotes_FINAL_lowres.pdf?1495787483

Climate and Health Alliance. June 2017. Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/caha/pages/40/attachments/original/1498008324/CA_HA_Framework_for_a_National_Strategy_on_Climate_Health_and_Well-being_v05_SCREEN_%28Full_Report%29.pdf?1498008324

Planning for Disaster Management: An emergency preparedness guide for Primary Health Networks and others supporting the local General Practitioner response during emergencies
https://www.nbmphn.com.au/Resources/About/268_0618-DisasterPlanning_F.aspx

More on climate and health can be found at:

Australia

- Doctors for the Environment Australia
<https://www.dea.org.au>
- Climate and Health Alliance
<http://www.caha.org.au> and <http://www.caha.org.au/tags/medical>
- Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACRRM)
https://www.acrrm.org.au/docs/default-source/documents/the-college-at-work/climate-change-and-human-health---position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=82ac6cec_2
- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP)
<https://www.racgp.org.au/support/library/subject-portals/climate-change-and-health/> and <https://www.racgp.org.au/afp/2009/september/climate-change/>
- Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)
<https://www.racp.edu.au/advocacy/policy-and-advocacy-priorities/climate-change-and-health>
- National Rural Health Alliance
<https://www.ruralhealth.org.au/sites/default/files/documents/nrha-policy-document/positions/nrhaclimatechangeandruralhealthfinal24dec19.pdf>

International

- The Lancet Health and Climate Change Countdown Reports
<http://www.thelancet.com/climate-and-health>
- The Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health
<https://medsocietiesforclimatehealth.org>
- The World Health Organization
 - WHO Fact Sheet: Climate Change and Health
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs266/en/>
 - Climate change and human health - risks and responses. Summary.
<https://www.who.int/globalchange/summary/en/>
 - Protecting Health from Climate change
<http://www.who.int/globalchange/en/>
 - Key health and climate change reports
<http://www.who.int/globalchange/publications/en/>