



PRESS RELEASE

Health professionals call for climate action after UN climate change report

(Sydney/Melbourne) 04/04/2014 – Health and medical organisations from Australia and around the world are calling on governments to respond to the major health risks described in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s recent Second Working Group reportⁱ, 'Impacts, Vulnerability and Adaptation', which was released on Monday.

In a briefing document summarising the IPCC report's implications for health, now and in the future, the Global Climate & Health Alliance (GCHA) argues that there is still time to turn what has been called "the biggest global health threat of the 21st century" into *one of our biggest opportunities to improve health*.

The Alliance's briefing report is being launched today, together with a short film, a social media 'thunderclap' and set of useful online resources. It summarises the state of the science, using evidence synthesised in the IPCC report as its primary basis, and calls for urgent action to protect health from climate change, and to promote health through low-carbon, sustainable development.

Globally, it is expected that climate change will exacerbate poverty and act as a driver of migration, further increasing vulnerability to extreme weather. But whilst the impacts are already being felt around the world, below are some examples of the ways in which climate change is already impacting on human health in Australia:

- The number of "dangerously hot" days, when core body temperatures may increase by 2°C or more, threatening health, is projected to rise from the current 4-6 days per year, to as high as 33-45 days per year by 2070.
- In one recent study in the US, but of significant relevance in the Australian context, the number of cases of squamous cell carcinoma was 5.5% higher for every 1°C rise in average temperatures, and basal cell carcinoma was 2.9% more common with every 1°C increase.
- Severe drought associated with climate change has been linked to psychological distress, particularly in rural areas of Australia.
- The record high temperatures and long-term drought which led to the 2009 Victoria bushfires caused fires of unprecedented intensity and 173 deaths, 412 people suffering burns, 7,560 people displaced and thousands more affected by smoke.

It is clear that human health is profoundly threatened by our failure to tackle climate change. Importantly, time is of the essence, as three prominent Australian health experts have recently emphasised, '*We have a closing window of time in which to do something about global climate change*'ⁱⁱ.

Many such statements from health professionals around the world come shortly after the World Health Organization revised its estimate of air pollution's health impact upwards, to seven million premature deaths annually: 1 in every 8 deaths globallyⁱⁱⁱ. Much of this air pollution is caused by the burning of fossil fuels. Physical inactivity – which correlates with car ownership – results in a further 3.2 million premature deaths each year. This means that policies to improve air quality and increase physical activity (for example, low-carbon energy and active travel policies) represent an unprecedented opportunity to improve global public health and tackle climate change simultaneously.

Many other such health 'co-benefits' exist, such as preventing thousands of avoidable heat and cold deaths through investment in home insulation, or major reductions in diseases like heart disease and stroke achievable by increasing active travel and reducing consumption of red and processed meat.

The Global Climate and Health Alliance (GCHA) and its Australian member, the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), call on the Australian government to commit to a binding and ambitious treaty at the UN climate negotiations in Paris 2015, including specific provision for the effective protection of public health. There is an urgent need to ensure that Australian climate policy is designed so as to maximise health benefits, and to ensure that the world achieves the sustained and rapid emissions reductions needed to avert dangerous climate change, which would be catastrophic for Australians' health.

Quotes:

"We are already seeing serious threats to health from heatwaves and bushfires in Australia, which are increasing due to climate change; but we know the worst impacts on health are being borne by those in developing nations. We can respond to this threat, and action now will prevent further harm. We call on our health and medical colleagues around the world to join us in demanding strong action to reduce emissions to limit these risks to health."

- Dr Liz Hanna, President, Climate and Health Alliance (Australia)

"This report really emphasises that climate change is the biggest threat to public health and that without urgent action to curb emissions, both by individuals and organisations, the impact on the health of many will continue to increase. The good thing is that there are co-benefits between action to reduce emissions and action to improve health - for example, walking and cycling instead of driving is both good for the planet and good for your health."

- Sue Atkinson, Co-Chair, Climate and Health Council

"The health sector needs to play a central role in addressing climate change by anchoring the community response to extreme weather events, leading by examples in mitigating its own climate footprint and becoming powerful messengers for climate policies that will improve the health of our communities and the planet."

- Gary Cohen, President, Health Care Without Harm

"Human health is incredibly fragile in light of the threat that climate change poses. Mitigation efforts can have large health benefits – reducing the burning of fossil fuels and moving to cleaner energy sources can bring down the rates of important chronic diseases, especially cardiopulmonary diseases and diabetes."

- Julia Huscher, Health and Environment Alliance (HEAL)

"Climate change and health are inextricably linked. As future physicians, medical students have a moral responsibility to put patients' health first. By taking action now we can improve the health of our communities, and prevent millions of needless deaths."

- Josko Mise, President, International Federation of Medical Students' Associations

Notes to editors:

The Global Climate and Health Alliance (GCHA) is made up of health organisations from across the globe who are united by a shared vision for a sustainable future. It was formed in Durban in 2011 to tackle climate change and to protect and promote public health. The Alliance aims to ensure health impacts are integrated into global, national and local responses to climate change and to encourage the health sector's mitigation and adaptation efforts.

You can find the resources described above at <http://climateandhealthalliance.org/ipcc>, and further information about climate change and health [here](#).

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References:

ⁱ IPCC AR5 report 'Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability': <http://ipcc-wg2.gov/ar5/>

ⁱⁱ The Conversation: 'Climate change and health: IPCC reports emerging risks, emerging consensus' <https://theconversation.com/climate-change-and-health-ipcc-reports-emerging-risks-emerging-consensus-24213>

ⁱⁱⁱ World Health Organisation: 7 million premature deaths annually linked to air pollution (News release) <http://who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2014/air-pollution/en/>