

Health and Climate Change

Approved January 2019

This position statement replaces the NZMA's 2015 statement on health and climate change.

Background

Climate change is a serious and urgent threat to health and health equity in New Zealand and worldwide.

The health threats from climate change in New Zealand include:

- i) direct impacts (eg, morbidity and mortality from high temperatures and other extreme weather events)
- ii) biologically mediated events (eg, changing patterns of infectious disease); and
- iii) socially mediated impacts (eg, loss of livelihood, forced migration, economic vulnerability and increased risks of conflict).

Those at greatest risk from the impacts of climate change in New Zealand include the most vulnerable population groups (eg, Māori, Pacific peoples, children, the elderly and those on low incomes).

Well planned measures to address climate change can have substantial health (and health equity) co-benefits. For example, a shift to active and public transport modes reduces greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and also increases physical activity and reduces respiratory illness from air pollution.

International responsibility for reducing GHG emissions is shared and must consider the principle of global equity and fairness. Addressing climate change requires concerted action by all countries at all levels, from individuals and organisations, to local and central governments.

The medical profession has a responsibility to advocate for strong action to mitigate climate change and its consequences. The 2015 *Lancet* Commission on Health and Climate Change¹ maps out the impacts of climate change, and the necessary policy responses to ensure the highest attainable standards of health for populations worldwide. The Commission's central finding is that tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century. The NZMA supports the 10 policy recommendations by the *Lancet* Commission.

The NZMA has endorsed the updated New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine (NZCPHM) 2018 climate change policy statement.² The following recommendations broadly align with the NZCPHM policy statement and summarise the key actions we believe are needed.

¹ Available from <http://www.thelancet.com/commissions/climate-change-2015>

² Available from https://www.nzcphm.org.nz/media/125138/climate_change_2018_with_provisos.pdf

Recommendations

1. Medical professionals should advocate for urgent, decisive and effective action to mitigate climate change and its consequences.
2. New Zealand must make a rapid, whole-of-society-transition to a low greenhouse gas (GHG) emitting nation. This will require ambitious emission reduction targets across all GHGs that are consistent with the best available scientific evidence, to limit global warming by 1.5 degrees C.
3. Health (including equity) impact assessments must routinely be undertaken to inform climate policy. Health co-benefits of measures to mitigate climate change (as well as health costs associated with inaction) need to be factored into all climate policy.
4. The health sector, particularly all DHBs, should develop and implement plans to reduce their carbon footprint. Environmental sustainability should be a key performance indicator for all DHBs.
5. All health sector organisations should divest their investments from the fossil fuel industry.
6. The health sector needs to prepare for the health impacts of climate change; planning should prioritise population groups that are likely to be most in need of health support, particularly Māori, Pacific peoples, children, the elderly and people with low income.
7. The Government should demonstrate international leadership in promoting effective and fair action to mitigate climate change. This should consider New Zealand's obligations to the small Pacific Island states, which are particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change.

Relevant Links

The 2015 *Lancet* Commission on Health and Climate Change is available from <http://www.thelancet.com/commissions/climate-change-2015>

The 2018 update of the New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine climate change policy statement is available from https://www.nzcphm.org.nz/media/125138/climate_change_2018_with_provisos_.pdf

The 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5° is available from <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/sr15/>.

This statement has been endorsed by the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS) and the New Zealand Nurses Organisation (NZNO).