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Australia lagging behind on climate and health policy: global survey

A report from a global survey to evaluate how nations are responding to the health impacts of climate change shows Australia is well behind other industrialised nations in protecting its citizen from the major health risks associated with global warming.

The report from the World Federation of Public Health Associations (WFPHA) outlines responses from 35 countries in the first-ever global benchmarking survey of national climate and health policy.

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) led the project working group, which includes experts from the WFPHA Environment Working Group/University of Illinois Chicago, Public Health Association of Australia, University of NSW, University of Notre Dame, and Health Care Without Harm.

Project coordinator and CAHA Executive Director Fiona Armstrong said the report was an important foundation for strengthening national and global climate and health plans.

“There has been too little attention given in national policy efforts and in the international climate negotiations to the critical issue of how our changing climate is putting the health and wellbeing of people at risk. Despite a massive contribution by researchers to document these risks over several decades, policymakers have been very slow to turn this evidence into policy and program that reduce these threats to the health of citizens.”

The report reveals more than half respondent countries (51%) lack a national plan to adequately protect the health of their citizens from climate change impacts.

Unlike China, New Zealand, Russia, and the USA, Australia has no national strategy on climate change and health.

Best performing countries included Lithuania, Cameroon, Taiwan and Spain, however the report emphasises the lack of preparedness was a global problem, and few countries (22.9%) had comprehensive policies that included assessment of health risks to their population or identified vulnerable populations and infrastructure (34.3%).

“As a wealthy country, and one that has a disproportionate contribution to climate change, and whose population is particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change, it is very disappointing to see this lack of leadership from policymakers in Australia,” Ms Armstrong said.

The report’s recommendations call for health protection and promotion to be a central principle in global climate policies being negotiated under the United National Framework Convention on Climate Change. It calls on all governments to develop national climate and health plans, addressing both adaptation to unavoidable warming and mitigation [to prevent further warming], and for health professional associations globally to make it a priority to raise awareness of the issue.

Australia has the potential to lead the world on this issue, Ms Armstrong said.

“There is an extraordinary depth of expertise and abundant evidence on this issue available to policymakers in Australia, and yet the our national government in particular is ignoring their responsibility to protect the health of their citizens.

While some local governments have been leading on adapting to climate change, protecting human health often takes a low priority compared to property, Ms Armstrong said.

“Australia’s approach to climate change needs far greater emphasis on human health, and this requires a coordinated approach between all levels of government, and strong leadership from the federal government.

“With some considered consultation, Australia could be leading the world on climate and health policy, offering resources and support to other nations, and in doing so, help to secure better health for its own and other populations,” she said.

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The report is available at: <http://caha.org.au/projects/climate-change-and-health-policy-assesment-project-report-a-global-survey-2015/>