



CLIMATE AND HEALTH ALLIANCE

19th July 2016

The Hon. Sussan Ley
Health Minister
Commonwealth of Australia

Dear Minister Ley,

We write to you, as health and medical professionals, out of concern for the health and wellbeing impacts that climate change is having on the Australian community and to encourage you to help lead the development of a national strategic response to the health impacts of climate change.

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), represents a large and diverse range of healthcare professionals, service providers, academics, and researchers. We advocate for action on climate change to limit the adverse impacts on human health from climate change, and for climate mitigation and adaptation strategies that promote health and well-being.

Climate change poses both risks and opportunities for population health in Australia. Depending on the level of ambition and strategies chosen by the Federal Government, Australia's climate policy will either negatively or positively drive health outcomes.

The scientific evidence on climate change and health, published in the international medical journal *The Lancet*, has concluded that the future of humanity is threatened by our global impacts on the Earth's systems, and that climate change poses an "unacceptably high and potentially catastrophic risk to human health".¹

The direct effects of climate change include increased heat stress, floods, drought, and increased frequency of intense storms and fire. These have both direct and indirect impacts, threatening population health through injury, adverse changes in air pollution, the spread of disease vectors, food insecurity and under-nutrition, displacement, and mental ill health, including post-traumatic stress disorder.

Climate change adversely impacts on the health care system, and if left unchecked, has the potential to undermine the last half-century of health gains.²

To date, human health has been afforded a lack of priority in Australia's national mitigation and adaptation policy and strategy actions. As such, Australia's health sector is underprepared to deal with the health risks associated with climate change, and equally, to capitalise on the benefits of mitigation actions.

It is becoming clear that many activities that cut emissions will also improve health and vice versa. While emissions reductions are important strategies to act on climate change, the benefits for health are significant and available immediately, while the climate benefits accumulate in the longer term. Emissions reduction strategies that reduce air pollution will help reduce the

incidence of respiratory diseases, heart attack and stroke. Shifting to more active and public forms of transport reduce emissions, and help tackle obesity, diabetes, depression and some cancers.³

The health co-benefits associated with emissions reduction strategies also offer extraordinary value in terms of the economic benefit: cost ratio. The financial savings associated with avoided ill-health and productivity gains can outstrip the costs of implementation – if strategies are carefully designed.

For example, a study by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) published in *Nature Climate Change* in 2014 found reducing emissions from fossil fuelled power generation and transport offers huge health benefits for local populations and significant savings for national budgets.⁴

The MIT study found that the savings from avoided ill health arising from the implementation of a national cap and trade program could return up to 10.5 times the cost of implementing the scheme.

Despite these risks and opportunities, a recent global survey reveals Australia lags behind comparable countries when it comes to protecting the health of its citizens from climate change.⁵

An evaluation of current impacts suggests Australians face serious and increasing climate change related health risks, including heat-related illnesses and deaths, outbreaks of infectious diseases, impacts from food and water insecurity, occupational health impacts, mental illness and stress associated with environmental damage and concern about climate change, domestic violence following disasters, and increased respiratory and cardiovascular diseases.

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To support Australia in meeting its national interests in protecting population health from the impact of climate change, as well as its international obligations in signing the Paris Agreement, the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) has developed a Discussion Paper to assist the process of developing and implementing a *National Strategy for Climate, Health and Well-being*.

The Discussion Paper demonstrates that none of Australia's current climate change policies address either the risks to health from climate change or the health benefits of strategies to cut emissions.

In order for Australia to meet its commitments under the Paris Climate Agreement (which requires nations to recognise the health rights of its citizens in the context of climate policy), Australia needs a national strategy to ensure climate policies are developed using a 'health lens'.

A *National Strategy on Climate, Health, and Well-being* will enable Australia to adequately respond to the risks to health from climate change, support the health sector to build climate resilience and transition to low carbon operations, promote education and awareness about climate change and health, strengthen climate and health research, and ensure climate policies are developed with a health 'lens' to ensure strategies are designed with health risks and benefits in mind.

The development of a national strategy on climate change and health, along with a commitment to effective action on cutting Australia's emissions in line with scientific recommendations is a

core issue for Australia's health and medical professionals. The protection of the health and wellbeing of the community must be paramount in national government responses.

The Climate and Health Alliance is using this Discussion Paper and the accompanying survey to commence a national conversation with health stakeholders across Australia about the need for a national strategy on climate change and health.

We know that current Australian and international carbon reduction commitments are inadequate to limit global warming to a safe level, and people's health is at risk. We urge you as Health Minister to help lead the development of a national strategic response to the health impacts of climate change, to protect the health of all people in Australia.

We would be grateful if you could advise what steps you intend to take to address the above.

Kind regards,

Fiona Armstrong
Executive Director
Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA)
On behalf of CAHA Directors and Members
www.caha.org.au

Climate and Health Alliance Members

Australian Association of Social Workers, Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association, Australian Council of Social Service, Australian Health Promotion Association, Australian Institute of Health Innovation, Australian College of Nursing, Australian Psychological Society, Australian Women's Health Network, Australian Medical Students Association, Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation, CRAN*plus*, Doctors Reform Society, Healthy Futures, Health Issues Centre, Health Services Union, Kooverup Regional Health Service, Public Health Association of Australia, Psychology for a Safe Climate, School of Public Health and Community Medicine, University of NSW, Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health, CoHealth, Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association, Women's Health East, and Women's Health in the North.

¹ 2015 Lancet Commission on health and climate, available at <http://www.thelancet.com/commissions/climate-change-2015>

² *ibid*

³ Armstrong, F. Our Uncashed Dividend, Climate and Health Alliance and The Climate Institute, 2012. Available at: http://caha.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/11/OurUncashedDividend_CAHAandTCI_August20121.pdf

⁴ Resutek, A. "Cutting Emissions Pays for Itself", News Release, MIT Joint Program on the Science and Policy of Global Change, 25 August 2014. Available at: http://globalchange.mit.edu/news-events/news/news_id/402#.VQJL0SkRFUQ

⁵ World Federation of Public Health Associations, Climate Change and Health Policy Assessment, Project Report, 2015.

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