

BRIEFING PAPER TO ACCOMPANY PROPOSAL FOR A NEW SAFETY AND QUALITY IN HEALTHCARE STANDARD OF 'CLIMATE RESILIENCE'

Climate change is a risk to safe, quality health care

In 2009, the international medical journal *The Lancet* described climate change as the “most serious threat to global public health of the 21st century”. Since 2009, our understanding of the impacts and consequences for health has strengthened considerably, along with the recognition that health services and health care are being adversely affected by the impacts of climate change, compromising the safety and quality of health care.

Climate change poses serious risks to human health, human settlements, livelihoods, infrastructure and transport networks, critical services such as electricity and water supplies, food security, and supply chains.ⁱ It poses substantial threats to the safety and quality of care through creating additional burdens on health services through increasing demand and through damage to hospital infrastructure and supply chains, yet these risks are not being addressed in safety and quality in healthcare frameworks or standards.

Major increases in ill-health are anticipated from continued climate change. These include greater rates of injuries, disease and deaths associated with: more intense heatwaves and fires and other extreme weather events; increased risks of food and water borne diseases; health consequences arising from lost work capacity associated with extreme weather; deleterious impacts on community mental health; and increasing air pollution.^{ii,iii,iv}

The key messages from the fifth and most recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report (AR5) are that humans are the dominant influence on the climate system and the more we disrupt our climate, the more we risk severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts. It also emphasises it is possible, and affordable, to limit climate change but this will require actions from people and institutions across all sectors of society, and the challenges and risks will only increase the longer we delay. As Professors Tony McMichael, Colin Butler and Helen Berry wrote in 2014: “we have a closing window of time in which to do something about global climate change”.^v

Like all services, health services are vulnerable to, and are being affected by, the direct consequences of extreme weather events, such as fires, floods, heatwaves, and storms. These events can cause disruptions to supply chains, electricity services, and water supplies; compromise the safety and quality of food services; suddenly and dramatically increase service demand; and interfere with service delivery through adverse impacts on personnel.^{vi} Changing patterns of diseases, increasing incidence of infectious and vector borne diseases, exacerbation of chronic illnesses, and increased incidence of respiratory illnesses associated ground-level ozone are all associated with rising temperatures and affect both users and providers of healthcare.

Steps are needed to ensure healthcare services are adequately prepared to ensure safety and quality of healthcare is not compromised as a result of climate change impacts, and that health services are taking positive steps to reduce their emissions to avoid contributing to the problem, and putting safety and quality even further at risk from increasingly dangerous climate change.

Australian community services are already reporting they are unable to cope with increases in extreme weather events, with 50% of small and medium services reporting that serious losses associated with extreme weather events (from damage to services and infrastructure) would lead to them permanently unable to provide services.^{vii}

Data from Queensland Health shows the flooding and cyclones in the state over the summer of 2010/2011 caused the cancellation of 1,396 booked elective operations due to increased demand on hospitals and staff unavailability. Damage to healthcare infrastructure required over \$18 million to repair damage to health facilities.^{viii}

When Hurricane Sandy hit New York in 2012, many hospitals were forced to evacuate from flooding, others were unable to function, many lost mains electrical power, and many had back-up generators that failed due to flooding.^{ix,x,xi} Subsequent investigations reveal poor accreditation systems contributed to service failures - many of those whose back-up systems failed would still have met standards for accreditation.^{xii} A case study of multiple hospital evacuations revealed the health system experiences prolonged increased patient volume, displaced staff, and disrupted telecommunications. Failure of these systems created chaos as communications with receiving facilities was limited and evacuated patients were transferred with little accompanying information.^{xiii}

A Victorian study of primary health care services revealed many lack guidance on responding to climate change, signalling institutional frameworks and guidelines to increase resilience against and preparedness for climate impacts are missing.^{xiv}

Hospitals are large consumers of energy and worldwide, make a large contribution to climate change. Reducing the environmental footprint of the sector will not only reduce its contribution to climate change, but also will contribute to improved public health through reducing environmental harm through natural resource depletion and production of toxic waste. Reducing energy, waste and water use, and implementing a comprehensive environmental management strategy can improve the safety and quality of care and improve facilities' and sector resilience to climate change. Preparedness for extreme events will improve health facilities' ability to function in the event of disasters and limit risks to safety and quality of care.

Limiting resource use and improving energy efficiency will provide financial savings that can be invested further in energy security measures. Ensuring services are climate resilient through improving the structural and functional safety of buildings, developing responsive and resilient supply chains, and establishing waste minimisation procedures will reduce risks to health service delivery and harm to patients and staff.

The **Proposed Standard for Minimising the Health Risks of Climate Change in Healthcare** is available at http://caha.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/Climate-Change-is-a-Threat-to-Safety-and-Quality-of-Health-Care_7-May-2015.pdf

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