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## From the President

22 November 2023

Senator Karen Grogan  
Chair  
Legislation Committee  
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via Email: [ec.sen@aph.gov.au](mailto:ec.sen@aph.gov.au)

Dear Senator

### **Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry. Our submission highlights the important part the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate) Equity Bill 2023 ("the Bill") can play in protecting current and future generations of children from the health impacts of climate change.

The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) trains, educates, and advocates on behalf of over 21,000 physicians and 9,000 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialties including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, infectious diseases medicine, occupational and environmental medicine, palliative medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine, rheumatology, and addiction medicine. The RACP is a member-led organisation committed to developing health and social policies which bring vital improvements to the wellbeing of patients and the community.

### **Climate change harms health and healthcare systems**

Climate change and health is one of the RACP's priority policy areas and we have position statements on [Climate Change and Health](#), [Environmentally Sustainable Healthcare](#) and the [Health Benefits of Mitigating Climate Change](#). More recently the RACP commissioned a report - [Climate Change and Australia's Healthcare Systems – A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice](#), which has been endorsed by nine other medical colleges. Partnering with a broad range of medical colleges and specialty societies, we lead the [Health Climate Future campaign](#), focusing on the risk to health and healthcare systems posed by climate change.

Climate change poses a significant health threat through impacts related to increasingly more frequent and intense extreme weather events, increasing temperatures, changes to vector-borne disease patterns, and worsening food and water shortages. Health consequences

include heat stress; respiratory, gastrointestinal, and cardiovascular illness; injury; malnutrition, and psychological distress.<sup>1</sup>

Australia is facing greater climate impacts than many other parts of the world and we have already been severely affected by drought, bushfires, extreme heat, and other climate-related extreme events.<sup>2</sup> Further, climate change is intensifying past injustices and disrupting cultural and spiritual connections to Country that are essential to the health and wellbeing of First Nations people.<sup>3</sup>

Climate change is also impacting healthcare systems, including exacerbating workforce shortages in rural and remote areas.<sup>4</sup> It also poses a risk to infrastructure and will significantly impact healthcare service delivery as outlined in our [Climate Change and Australia's Healthcare Systems – A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice report](#).<sup>5</sup> Over the past decade, hospitalisations stemming from extreme weather events have increased<sup>6</sup>, highlighting the risk climate change poses to healthcare systems.

### **Climate change impacts intergenerational equity, including the health of children**

The RACP considers that “all children, no matter where they live or who they are, should have the same opportunity to fulfil their potential”.<sup>7</sup> Children have a fundamental right to a healthy environment, as outlined in [General comment No. 26 \(2023\) on children's rights and the environment, with a special focus on climate change](#),<sup>8</sup> and climate change poses a significant threat to this right.

As a paediatrician, I am conscious of the influence that social, environmental, and wider determinants of health have on whether a child can meet their potential. Environmental determinants include impacts of climate change-mediated extreme weather events, air pollution, and food insecurity, which can affect early childhood growth and development, and the mental health and wellbeing of children.<sup>9</sup>

In [Monitoring climate change and child health: The case for putting children in all policies](#)<sup>10</sup>, the authors outline how the climate change and health impacts outlined by the [Lancet Countdown](#) are putting children at risk and impacting their futures. The article also emphasises

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Climate Change and Health Position Statement [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2016. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-health-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=5235361a\\_5](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-health-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=5235361a_5).

<sup>2</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Climate Change and Australia's Healthcare Systems – A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice report [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2021. Available from: [climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf \(racp.edu.au\)](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Lowitja Institute. Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Healthy Environments and Lives (HEAL) Network & Centre for Research Excellence in Strengthening Systems for Indigenous Health Care Equity (CRE-STRIDE) [Internet]. 2021. Available from: [https://www.lowitja.org.au/content/Image/Lowitja\\_ClimateChangeHealth\\_1021\\_D10.pdf](https://www.lowitja.org.au/content/Image/Lowitja_ClimateChangeHealth_1021_D10.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Inequalities in Child Health. [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2021. Available from <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-inequities-in-child-health-position-statement.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Climate Change and Australia's Healthcare Systems A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice [Internet]. [cited 2023 Nov 17]. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=efe8c61a\\_6](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=efe8c61a_6)

<sup>6</sup> Let's talk about the weather: injuries related to extreme weather, About [Internet]. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. 2023 [cited 2023 Nov 14]. Available from: <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/injury/extreme-weather-injuries/contents/about>

<sup>7</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Inequalities in Child Health. [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2021. Available from <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-inequities-in-child-health-position-statement.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> OHCHR | Committee on the Rights of the Child [Internet]. OHCHR. Available from: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/documents/general-comments-and-recommendations/crccgc26-general-comment-no-26-2023-childrens-rights>

<sup>9</sup> Climate Change and Australia's Healthcare Systems A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice [Internet]. [cited 2023 Nov 17]. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=efe8c61a\\_6](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=efe8c61a_6)

<sup>10</sup> Romanello M, McGushin A, MacGuire FAS, Sly PD, Jennings B, Requejo J, et al. Monitoring climate change and child health: The case for putting children in all policies. *J Paediatr Child Health* 2021 11;57(11):1736-1740.

the need for strong policy responses that mitigate climate change, harness co-benefits, and focus on children.

It is positive to see that the [Intergenerational Report 2023](#) recognises climate change and the transition to net zero as an important part in shaping Australia's future wellbeing, including its economy and population health.<sup>11</sup>

We consider that the emphasis the Bill places on the health and wellbeing of children is essential to prepare for a future where children survive and flourish. We would welcome a broadening of the Bill to also consider Australia's role in protecting and promoting the health of children in Aotearoa New Zealand, across the Pacific, and globally.

### **The Bill is a legislative opportunity to support the National Health and Climate Strategy**

The RACP has welcomed the development of a National Health and Climate Strategy ("Strategy") and I have been pleased to be part of the Chief Medical Officer Advisory Group informing this process. Our [submission on the Health and Climate Strategy](#) emphasises the need to build healthy and climate-resilient communities, and we call on the Australian Government to adopt a comprehensive and ambitious strategy to protect the health of all Australians from the impacts of climate change.

We are calling for the Strategy to be fully funded and resourced on an ongoing basis. Further, National Cabinet should sign off on the Strategy and establish a governance framework and funding mechanisms that enables urgent, coordinated, and effective implementation of the Strategy.

The Bill is an opportunity to consider legislation that aligns with the imperatives of health protection and promotion that we consider the Strategy should prioritise.

We commend the Bill's recognition of the holistic nature of health and wellbeing, through inclusion of emotional, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of health. This aligns with our submission<sup>12</sup> on the Strategy, which emphasises the importance of holistic approaches to health and wellbeing in developing effective climate change and health policies and strategies.

The RACP recognises the leadership and knowledge of Aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, and Māori peoples in taking holistic approaches to health in its [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Position Statement](#)<sup>13</sup> and, the [Indigenous Strategic Framework](#)<sup>14</sup>.

### **Fossil fuels contribute to climate change and impact health directly**

The RACP recognises the importance of whole-of-government and [Health in All Policies](#) approaches to addressing both health equity and climate change.

Cross-government action is needed to facilitate an urgent transition from fossil fuels to clean, renewable energy across all economic sectors. The RACP has called on all Australian governments to require all fossil fuel extraction projects within their jurisdiction to undertake a

<sup>11</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians [Internet]. www.racp.edu.au. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians; [cited 2023 Nov 2]. Available from: <https://www.racp.edu.au/news-and-events/media-releases/intergenerational-report-highlights-the-critical-need-for-prevention-and-for-specialists-to-be-included-in-multidisciplinary-care>

<sup>12</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Submission to National Health and Climate Strategy Consultation [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2023. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-submission-national-health-and-climate-strategy-consultation.pdf?sfvrsn=2c07d51a\\_8](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-submission-national-health-and-climate-strategy-consultation.pdf?sfvrsn=2c07d51a_8).

<sup>13</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Position Statement [Internet]. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians; 2018 [cited 2023 Jul 21]. Available from: <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-2018-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-health-position-statement.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Indigenous Strategic Framework [Internet]. The Royal Australasian College of Physicians; 2018 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: <https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/default-document-library/indigenous-strategic-framework.pdf>

full independent Health Impact Assessment before proceeding, including the effects on climate change.<sup>15</sup> This aligns with the Bill's requirement to consider the health and wellbeing of current and future children in Australia when making significant decisions, including in relation to fossil fuel projects.

Fossil fuel combustion and extraction are major contributors to climate change and cause other environmental impacts, such as air pollution and water contamination<sup>16</sup>. These have a significant impact on health, including respiratory disease, cardiovascular disease, and may increase risk of premature births.<sup>17</sup>

As outlined in a [joint position statement on air pollutants](#)<sup>18</sup> endorsed by the RACP, fossil fuels contribute to pollutants such as nitrogen dioxide and sulphur dioxide, which cause a range of health impacts including heart, lung, and circulatory issues. [The recent Risks of Oil and Gas Development for Human Health and Wellbeing: A Synthesis of Evidence and Implications for Australia report](#) synthesises evidence on the health risks of oil and gas development. It also highlights the concerns, losses and harms that Aboriginal people have experienced in relation to oil and gas developments on their Country.

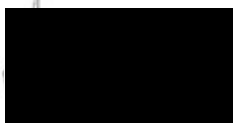
Without urgent action, climate change will continue to have serious and worsening consequences for public health.<sup>19</sup> Healthcare systems will remain unprepared for the next climate disaster.<sup>20</sup> An urgent transition to renewables will reduce future harm to health from climate change, as well as create health benefits through reduced impacts on environmental determinants of health, including air pollution.

### **The Bill is an opportunity to protect the health of children**

The RACP welcomes the Bill's recognition of the impacts of climate change on human health and wellbeing, particularly on children, and in safeguarding the health of both present and future generations. Governments and policymakers have a critical role to play in protecting children's rights and ensuring a sustainable future.

Please contact Katrina Gardner, Policy and Advocacy Officer, Policy & Advocacy, via email at [policy@racp.edu.au](mailto:policy@racp.edu.au) if you would like to discuss or require further information.

Yours sincerely



Dr Jacqueline Small

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<sup>15</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). The Health Benefits of Mitigating Climate Change Position Statement [Internet]. RACP; Sydney (AU) 2016. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/health-benefits-of-mitigating-climate-change-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=3d34361a\\_5](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/health-benefits-of-mitigating-climate-change-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=3d34361a_5).

<sup>16</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). The Health Benefits of Mitigating Climate Change Position Statement [Internet]. RACP; Sydney (AU) 2016. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/health-benefits-of-mitigating-climate-change-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=3d34361a\\_5](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/health-benefits-of-mitigating-climate-change-position-statement.pdf?sfvrsn=3d34361a_5).

<sup>17</sup> As above

<sup>18</sup> Health-based standards for Australian regulated thresholds of nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and ozone [Internet]. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/c-noxso2o3\\_expert-position-statement\\_final.pdf?sfvrsn=76981c1a\\_10](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/c-noxso2o3_expert-position-statement_final.pdf?sfvrsn=76981c1a_10)

<sup>19</sup> The Lancet. The 2022 report of the *Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: health at the mercy of fossil fuels. [Internet]. November 2022. [https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736\(22\)01540-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/article/S0140-6736(22)01540-9/fulltext)

<sup>20</sup> The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Climate Change and Australia's Healthcare Systems A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2021. Available from: [https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=efe8c61a\\_6](https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/climate-change-and-australias-healthcare-systems-a-review-of-literature-policy-and-practice.pdf?sfvrsn=efe8c61a_6).