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From the President

30 October 2023

Senator Sarah Hanson-Young
Chair
References Committee
Senate Standing Committees on Environment and Communications
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Via Email: ec.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Senator

Middle Arm Industrial Precinct Senate Inquiry

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry. Our submission focuses on the health impacts of fossil fuels, both directly and through their contribution to 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.

We are concerned about the direct and long-term health impacts of gas extraction to local, regional, and global populations. We wrote to the [Australian Prime Minister](#) and the [Northern Territory Chief Minister](#) earlier in the year about the health impacts of fossil fuel extraction and use. We urge the Inquiry to ensure that the health impacts of Middle Arm are paramount considerations in any decision-making relating to its establishment and use.

Climate change harms health

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 distress¹.

Australia is facing greater climate impacts than many other parts of the world² and the Northern Territory faces increasingly hot temperatures and the complex challenges of supporting communities in rural and remote areas through extreme weather. Further, “climate change is compounding historical injustices and disrupts cultural and spiritual connections to Country that are central to health and wellbeing”³ for First Nations people.

We have both seen firsthand some of the challenges physicians in the Territory face. The RACP is conscious of health workforce pressures and burnout, particularly in rural, remote, and regional areas⁴ and challenges presented by climate change exacerbating workforce shortages in rural and remote areas⁵. Workforce shortages are just one of the challenges that climate change will bring to healthcare systems as outlined in our [Climate Change and Australia’s Healthcare Systems – A Review of Literature, Policy and Practice report](#)⁶.

We understand the importance of early childhood growth and development and the adverse and long-lasting impacts that extreme weather events, air pollution, and food insecurity can have on the health and wellbeing of children and young people.

The National Health and Climate Strategy is an opportunity to promote health

The RACP has welcomed the development of a National Health and Climate Strategy (Strategy) and has been pleased to be part of the Chief Medical Officer Advisory Group informing this process. [Our submission on the Strategy](#)⁷ emphasises the need for healthy and climate resilient communities to be a key objective of the Strategy that is addressed through a Health in All Policies approach.

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

The RACP has also supported the prioritisation of First Nations leadership of the Strategy. We have urged the recognition of the ongoing impact of colonisation, dispossession and marginalisation, and the prioritisation of self-determination, Indigenous community leadership, community engagement, and cultural safety within the Strategy. Our feedback also emphasised the need for strong partnerships and co-design with a broad range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stakeholders.

¹ 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.

² 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?sfvrsn=efe8c61a_6).

³ 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.

⁴ The Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP). Pathways to Wellbeing: Enhancing the health and wellbeing of all Australians [Internet]. Sydney (AU): RACP; 2023. Available from: https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/racp-2023-24-pre-budget-submission-to-aust-treasury.pdf?sfvrsn=7c43d11a_6.

⁵ Pendrey C, Quilty S, Lucas R. Surveying the changing climate of Northern Territory medical workforce retention. Aust J Rural Health 2022 06;30(3):402-409.

⁶ 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.

⁷ 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.

These principles are also relevant to the Inquiry in that it must ensure meaningful consultation with Aboriginal people, communities, and organisations.

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 full independent Health Impact Assessment before proceeding, including the effects on climate change”⁸.

Fossil fuel combustion and extraction contribute significantly to climate change and cause other environmental impacts, including air pollution and water contamination⁹. These in turn have harmful health impacts. As outlined in a [joint position statement on air pollutants](#)¹⁰ 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](#)¹¹ synthesises evidence on the health risks of oil and gas development and should be considered by the Inquiry. It also highlights the concerns, losses and harms that Aboriginal people have experienced in relation to oil and gas developments on their Country.

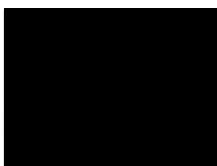
An urgent transition to renewables will reduce future harm to health from climate change, as well as create health benefits through reduced air pollution and reduced occupational and environmental health hazards for workers involved in fossil fuel extraction.

The Senate Inquiry is an opportunity to show leadership in protecting health

The Senate Inquiry into the Middle Arm Industrial Precinct must recognise the health harms of fossil fuels, both directly and through the contribution of fossil fuels to climate change. Projects that extract or use fossil fuels or support the extraction or use of fossil fuels are a threat to the health of local communities and to the health of the populations across the globe being impacted by climate change. The Inquiry should do everything it can to ensure that the health harms that could arise from Middle Arm are prevented.

Please contact Ekta Sharma, Senior Policy and Advocacy Officer, Policy & Advocacy, via email at policy@racp.edu.au if you would like to discuss or require further information.

Yours sincerely



Dr Jacqueline Small
President
RACP



Dr Richard Budd
Chair, Northern Territory Committee
RACP

⁸ 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.

⁹ As above.

¹⁰ Healthy Lung Research Centre Health-based standards for Australian regulated thresholds of nitrogen dioxide, sulfur dioxide and ozone [Internet]. Melbourne (AU) 2021. Available from: https://www.racp.edu.au/docs/default-source/advocacy-library/c-noxso2o3_expert-position-statement_final.pdf?sfvrsn=76981c1a_10.

¹¹ Haswell M, Hegedus J, Shearman D: The risks of oil and gas development for human health and wellbeing: a synthesis of evidence and implications for Australia. University of Sydney (AU) 2023. Available from: https://www.sydney.edu.au/content/dam/corporate/documents/about-us/values-and-visions/aboriginal-and-torres-straight-islander-community/risks_of_oq_development.pdf.