



# Future-proofing the healthcare system

## Australia must take urgent action to address the health impacts of climate change

The health impacts of climate change are a critical public health concern. Urgent action on climate change represents an opportunity to simultaneously reduce the harms and risks of climate change and improve health outcomes for Australians, the region and the world.

Unchecked, climate change will not only have serious impacts on human health but will put pressure on healthcare services and personnel forced to cope with increasing frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. Climate change has become a true health emergency warranting urgent and decisive government action to address its growing contribution to mortality and morbidity.<sup>1</sup>

**2018 was Australia's third-warmest year on record, with extreme temperatures and an extended period of heatwaves.<sup>2</sup>**

**Extreme heat events in Australia have been more fatal than all other natural hazards combined and will increase without climate action and adaptation.<sup>3</sup>**

“ Australians are already suffering health impacts including higher rates of respiratory illness, diarrhea and morbidity requiring hospital admission during hot days, and higher rates of suicide in rural areas during drought years. ”

– Professor Linda Selvey, RACP Fellow and Associate Professor, School of Public Health at the University of Queensland

### The RACP is part of a global network of health and medical organisations calling on the Government to tackle climate change by:



1. Strong action to meet the Paris Agreement targets for cutting emissions



3. Implementing rigorous domestic policies to address the adverse health effects of climate change and realise the health co-benefits of action, including adaptation and mitigation measures



2. Developing a national climate change and health strategy that covers meaningful mitigation and adaptation targets, effective governance and collaboration arrangements, education and a strong research capacity



4. Establishing a national healthcare sustainable development unit to reduce the carbon footprint of the health sector

<sup>1</sup> Solomon, CG & LaRocque, RC. (2019). Climate Change – A Health Emergency. N Engl J Med 2019; 380:209-211

<sup>2</sup> Australian Government Bureau of Meteorology. Annual climate statement 2018 and Special Climate Statement 68.

<sup>3</sup> Coates L., Haynes K., O'Brien J., McAneney J., De Oliveira F.D. Exploring 167 years of vulnerability: An examination of extreme heat events in Australia 1844-2010. Environmental Science and Policy 2014; 42:33-44.

## Clear and concrete action on climate change means:



### The health sector putting its house in order

The carbon footprint of the Australian health sector has been estimated at seven per cent of Australia's total, demonstrating the need for effective measures to lower the impact of health-care services on the environment, including reducing its own carbon emissions.<sup>4</sup> Lowering emissions can happen alongside increased healthcare activity, adding to the triple bottom line of saving money, adding social value and improving health.

An environmentally sustainable healthcare system is one that has no cumulative harmful impacts on the natural environment or society while providing high-quality healthcare.

'Green' initiatives such as improving energy efficiency and promoting recycling are important, but healthcare organisations need to act more broadly to reduce carbon and resource use and waste by developing integrated models of care, strengthening primary care and optimising use of new technologies.



In January 2016, the NHS released the Sustainable Development in Health and Care Report which showed the NHS **reduced its carbon emissions by 11%** during 2007-2015 exceeding the 10% target set in 2009. This was achieved despite an 18% increase of healthcare activity.



### Realising the health benefits of adaptation and mitigation

The incoming government must commit to developing and implementing a comprehensive national climate and health strategy to reduce the risks to health and realise the health benefits of adaptation and mitigation. The strategy must set out health-promoting and emissions-reducing policies and actions supporting emergency and disaster-preparedness, healthy and

resilient communities, education and capacity building and a sustainable and climate-resilient health sector. The strategy would provide a national public policy framework to coordinate these actions across government portfolios and at all levels of government.



### Managing the serious risks to human health

Anthropogenic climate change is real and urgent and aggressive effort is needed to stop warming at 1.5°C, as shown in the 2018 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C. Beyond our borders, the government must continue to enable Pacific Island countries and territories to develop their medical workforce and support development of prevention/mitigation and response measures to climate change. The impact of severe weather events in the Pacific Islands, including health impacts due to rising sea levels and biosecurity concerns, will be of growing importance in the years to come.

We must work to amplify the links between measures

to promote sustainability, prevention and equity in health care to realise environmental benefits and deliver better health outcomes.

A national obesity strategy will encourage healthier physical activity environments and boost sustainable food production and consumption practices that mitigate the effects of climate change, while the reduction in resource use in the health sector will translate to more funds invested in equity and prevention.

*Facts and statistics in this document are sourced from the RACP Position Statements: Climate change*

<sup>4</sup> Malik, A, Lenzen, M, et al, The carbon footprint of Australian health care, Lancet, 2018. [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196\(17\)30180-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanph/article/PIIS2542-5196(17)30180-8/fulltext)