

Policy Document

Climate Change and Health Policy

Background

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body of Australia's medical students. AMSA believes that all communities have the right to the best attainable health. Accordingly, AMSA advocates on issues that impact local, national and global health outcomes.

AMSA acknowledges climate change is a great threat to global health in the 21st century, and call for human health to be placed at the centre of UNFCCC (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change) international negotiations where it will stand as an effective framework from which to build a fair, ambitious and legally binding global deal [1]. In this, we seek to preserve a society that promotes equality, avoid future conflicts and environmental refugees, and safeguard the right to health for all countries and all peoples.

Following the 2009 UNFCC Copenhagen summit, there exists universal political, scientific and public health consensus that climate change is both man-made and occurring at unprecedented rates, posing a very significant threat to the health of global populations [2].

Disturbances in climate stability will severely harm the health of individuals and communities through extreme weather events, extreme heat waves, bush fires, natural disasters, floods and resulting diarrhoeal disease, an increase in vector borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever, degradation of arable land, nutritional impacts, mass migration of climate refugees and violent conflict [3]. Changes to the climate resulting in water scarcity and decreased sanitation alone will have devastating effects on public health systems in affected areas.

Estimates of the potential number of people that will be displaced by continued climate change (climate refugees) has been suggested to be in the hundreds of millions by 2050 [4]. This comes as a result of extreme weather events and environmental degradation directly exacerbated by climate change. An exact number is difficult to calculate due to the unpredictable nature of climatic events however it is evident that migration will come both as a result of loss of arable land and therefore resource availability as well as a through a direct impact on housing. Those living in the Low Elevation Coastal Zone (LECZ) less than 10 metres above sea - level are at particular risk of climatic events such as sea level rises and storm surges [5].

Australia is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of anthropogenic climate change, considering the reliance on broad acre agriculture, natural resources and that the majority of the population lives and works near the coastline in flood susceptible zones. Additionally Australia is experiencing a significant trend in hotter temperatures and longer duration of heat events exacerbating conditions for natural disasters such as bush fires [6].

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AMSA acknowledges the significant co-benefits to health by implementing mitigation strategies. These benefits include developments in areas of transport (especially public transport, pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure) agriculture, renewable electricity generation and increased efficiency in energy use [7]. As future health professionals we acknowledge our duty of care to our patients and our communities. We therefore strive towards the prevention of climate change as a recognised and serious threat to global public health.

AMSA supports the policy position of the WHO (World Health Organisation) in regards to climate change and health, the Climate Health Council's Prescription for a Healthy Planet, CAHA (Climate and Health Alliance) and the 4th assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [3,7].

Position Statement

AMSA affirms its stance that:

1. Climate change, particularly global warming, is directly attributable to human activity.
2. Climate change is a great threat to global health in the 21st century.
3. The impacts of climate change affect (and will continue to do so at an increasing rate) the world's most disadvantaged populations earlier and most severely.
4. Immediate and sustainable mitigation and adaptive action must be taken on a local, national and global level if we are to safeguard global public health.
5. The costs associated with climate change must be shared fairly between nations. In light of climate change as a global issue, any associated costs should be considered with regard for disparity of responsibility, equity and consequence.
6. Health must be placed at the centre of any international negotiations on climate change as a universal goal.
7. Scientific debate concerning the finer details of climate change science must not inhibit the international community's capacity for immediate action and of preventive measures which safeguard global public health.
8. The international health community must actively engage in the debate and negotiation process taking place within the UNFCCC.
9. Health professionals as individuals and their representative organisations must take an external advocacy role in impelling their local governments and health ministers to act in a way that reduces national emissions.
10. The medical profession has a key role to play in terms of advocacy, taking practical steps towards preventing climate change and preparing for its likely consequences for health.
11. The 2009 Copenhagen Accord is inadequate in face of the global threat of catastrophic climate change, and negotiations within the UNFCCC and IPCC should continue as swiftly as possible, with the aim of achieving a meaningful global agreement.

Policy

In light of the above stance and recent events:

1. AMSA calls upon the Australian Federal Government to:
 - a. Achieve the greatest feasible reduction in greenhouse gas emissions at a minimum of 25-40% of 1990 levels by 2020 and 80% by 2050 in accordance with the IPCC recommendations [3].
 - b. Act both fairly and responsibly within the international community - particularly within the two negotiation tracks (The Conference of the Parties, and the Conference Meeting of the Parties) of the UNFCCC - taking bold but achievable steps towards a sustainable future.
 - c. Invest time, effort and finances into mechanisms that create real rather than theoretical CO₂e reductions.

- d. Strengthen the adaptive capacity of vulnerable countries (particularly those within the Asia-Pacific region) to minimise the adverse impacts of climate change, with adequate financial, technological and logistical support.
 - e. Improve Australia's ability to respond humanely and generously to individuals displaced by climate change (climate refugees), especially Australia's neighbours of the Pacific islands.
 - f. Invest in improving both national and international water and food security.
 - g. Train a health workforce capable of effectively managing the health effects of climate change.
 - h. Fund further research into the likely consequences of climate change on health.
2. AMSA calls upon the medical profession to play a key role in addressing climate change and health, and believes that;
 - a. Climate change and its relationship to health should be integrated within the medical curricula of Australian medical schools.
 - b. Medical students and practitioners as individuals, as well as organisations representing the interests of medical students and practitioners, should take the lead in educating the public on the likely effects of climate change on health, as well as directly lobbying key stakeholders including government, to take action on the issue.
 - c. All health sectors from medical schools, private practices and clinics to primary, secondary and tertiary hospitals to move away from carbon intensive energy sources to renewable energy sources.

Additionally, in order to avoid catastrophic health effects of climate change, and in line with IPCC targets, AMSA calls for:

1. The peak of global CO₂e emissions by 2015.
2. A cap on greenhouse gas emissions such that the atmospheric concentrations of CO₂ does not continue to exceed 400 ppm.
3. A global temperature increase of no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius, ensuring the safety of our eco-systems and the health of vulnerable populations.
4. Every national health sector to radically decrease their own emissions through a reduction in energy consumption, improved waste management and adoption and implementation of renewable electricity sources.
5. A fair international negotiation process under the UNFCCC, in which the rights of every country and their peoples are respected and represented equally.

AMSA calls for what science and justice demand of the global community - a reduction of carbon emissions to levels which ensure the survival of our planet's eco-system and the protection of human health.

References

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Policy Details

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Following a review and repeal of a similar policy adopted in 2010.