

Climate Change and Health

Much of the policy debate on climate change in Australia and elsewhere has focused on environmental impacts and the economic impacts of the policy response with relatively little discussion about the consequences of climate change on human health and the demands on the health system.

Yet the consequences are significant with the Australian Climate Commission stating that “climate change is harming our health in Australia, and poses a significant threat for the future”.

A joint paper by the Climate and Health Alliance and The Climate Institute has highlighted the health benefits obtainable through climate action. These benefits include reductions in cardiovascular, respiratory and nervous system diseases by reducing reliance on coal-fired power generation and reducing the risk of ischaemic heart disease, dementia and depression by switching to active transport options like walking and cycling.

With the health sector responsible for 7 per cent of total carbon emissions from buildings in Australia, there is significant scope for the sector to reduce its carbon footprint through greater energy efficiency measures.

While greening initiatives have often been viewed as costly investments with little or no direct cost benefit to the organisation, it has been clearly demonstrated that the adoption of sustainable practices can achieve realisable cost savings at the institutional level.

AHHA POSITION:

- ✧ The health sector can play a major role in climate action; both in terms of reducing the carbon footprint of the sector and as a leader and influencer of opinion at the community level.
- ✧ Actions intended to address climate change can also deliver positive health improvements.
- ✧ The health impacts of climate change, such as altered distribution of infectious diseases and illness and fatalities related to severe weather events, are significant issues which require the adaptation of existing health services and coordinated planning of future service models and health service facilities.
- ✧ Health service delivery models and infrastructure development should focus on maximising sustainability and minimising environmental impacts.
- ✧ The UK’s National Health Service Sustainable Development Unit (SDU) provides a good model for developing and supporting appropriate mitigation and adaptation programs in the health sector.
- ✧ Government policy development at all levels should include consideration of environmental impact and sustainability. The impact on costs for health service providers for implementing initiatives should be recognised.