

## Joint statement

2 December, 2021

### **Climate change is the biggest threat to health system**

Medical Colleges from across Australia and New Zealand say that climate change is the biggest current threat to the future of the Australian healthcare system and is calling on the Federal Government to commit to stronger 2030 targets.

The Colleges are calling for the Federal Government to urgently come up with a plan to protect Australians and the healthcare system from the impacts of climate change.

The call comes as the Royal Australasian College of Physicians releases a report it commissioned, prepared by the Monash Sustainable Development Institute. The report, endorsed by 10 Medical Colleges, paints a dire picture of the future of the Australian healthcare system under the unmitigated impacts of climate change.

The report includes a model of the cost of bushfires of varying magnitudes modelled between 2021 and 2030 inclusive. The analysis predicted the loss of 1480 lives, equating to 4024 years of life; healthcare costs of \$69 million; and a \$10 billion impact on gross domestic product.

The RACP report has been endorsed by the:

- Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP)
- Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)
- Australian and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA)
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG)
- Australasian College for Emergency Medicine (ACEM)
- College of Intensive Care Medicine (CICM)
- Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO)
- Australasian College of Sports and Exercise Physicians (ACSEP)

The recommendations in the report include:

- Establish a dedicated climate change health resilience fund to support research and innovation
- Build capacity in the healthcare sector, health workforce and the wider health system

- Develop climate risk and capacity assessments and locally-led disaster planning for healthcare systems
- Commit to and develop a plan for delivering net zero healthcare by 2040
- Implement and fund a national strategy on climate change and health
- Embed Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander knowledge and leadership in all climate change policy and action
- Invest in prevention and early intervention as a key element of climate change and health strategy

**Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP) President Professor John Wilson** says, “Climate change is already having a significant impact on the Australian healthcare system – and without a plan in place to mitigate this – our healthcare system will not cope.

“The report released today brings into focus the dangerous threat that climate change poses to our healthcare system and recommends that the Government commit to better 2030 targets and start preparing the healthcare system for the inevitable challenge ahead.”

**Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists (RANZCOG)** President Dr Benjamin Bopp says, “Governments, institutions and individuals must take responsibility to address the reversible causes of climate change and introduce policies to reduce environmental degradation for the benefit of current and future generations.”

**Royal Australasian College of General Practitioners (RACGP)** President Dr Karen Price says, “Climate change is a health emergency. GPs across Australia are already seeing the impacts, such as the tragic 2019 Black Summer bushfires which devastated so many communities and had a lasting impact on peoples’ health and wellbeing,” Dr Price said. “This report shows the need for Australia to commit to stronger 2030 targets, and to invest in the healthcare system; health professionals need to be equipped with the information, tools and resources to prepare for the challenges ahead and response to health impacts.”

**Australasian College for Emergency Medicine (ACEM)** President Dr Clare Skinner says, “As an emergency physician, I know an emergency when I see one. Without immediate action, climate change will increase the amount of emergency presentations and exert more pressure on our dangerously overcrowded health systems. We must act now to protect people from the worst health effects of climate change, today– and into the future.”

**Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists (RANZCO) President Clinical Professor Nitin Verma AM,** says, *“This report lays bare the vulnerability of our systems and communities to climate change. Our college joins with the rest of our profession to call for leadership from the Federal Government on decarbonizing our society and building resilience to drought, fire, floods and heat stress. RANZCO has made our own commitment to addressing climate change within our part of the health sector, but only advocacy for a coordinated national and global response can effect meaningful changes.”*

Emeritus Professor David Fletcher AM, Chair of the **Royal Australasian College of Surgeons (RACS)** Environmental Sustainability in Surgical Practice Working Party says *“The health-care community must take a leadership role in advocating for emissions reductions, and to critically examine our own activities with respect to their effects on human and environmental health. Surgeons are committed to reducing the footprint of our practice given it currently accounts for the majority of health’s emissions. We commend this report as laying the groundwork for how we can collectively work together to mitigate the dire risks on human health posed by climate change.”*

**Australia and New Zealand College of Anaesthetists (ANZCA) President, Dr Vanessa Beavis** says “Anaesthetists are well positioned to contribute to solutions to reduce healthcare’s environmental impact. ANZCA has established an Environmental Sustainability Network, which will drive the profession to advance sustainable healthcare practice, promote research, and support education in this area.”

**Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZP)** President Associate Professor Vinay Lakra says, “We know that changes in our climate are increasing the likelihood and severity of natural disasters, directly impacting the mental health of individuals and communities. This report highlights the urgent need for a set of comprehensive policy responses at the health service, network and government levels. Capacity development across mental health and the wider health system will be fundamental to addressing these challenges.”

**Dr Mary Pinder, President of the College of Intensive Care Medicine (CICM)**, says “Urgent and meaningful action on climate change is needed to mitigate the effects of climate change and its impact on the healthcare system. The College of Intensive Care Medicine welcomes this report and urges the Federal Government to act on its recommendations.”

The full report can be accessed here: <https://www.racp.edu.au/advocacy/policy-and-advocacy-priorities/climate-change-and-health>

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