

Australian Medical Students' Association: Submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry



Background

The Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) is the peak representative body for Australia's 17,000 medical students. AMSA believes that all communities have the right to the best attainable health outcomes. Accordingly, AMSA advocates on issues that impact health on local, national and global levels. AMSA Code Green is an AMSA Global Health Project which advocates for action on climate change to mitigate the health impacts of a changing environment.

This policy brief has been developed by AMSA Code Green for submission to the Western Australian government's Climate Health WA Inquiry under the *Public Health Act 2016*.

AMSA believes that climate change is the greatest global health threat of the 21st century, which will fundamentally alter the status and management of Australia's public health. As the peak representative body for Australia's future medical workforce, AMSA advocates for the development of climate change mitigation and adaptation plans at all levels of government and believes that health considerations should be at the centre of these plans. Ultimately, to ensure the best public health outcomes, it is essential that all possible measures are put in place to limit global warming to a maximum of 1.5 degrees Celsius. Falling short of meeting this target will render all governmental efforts to mitigate health effects caused by climate change ineffectual.

As the Western Australian Department of Health conducts its Inquiry, AMSA makes the following recommendations:

1. Conduct research into local health impacts of climate change, as well as health and economic benefits of mitigation and adaptation, to inform future policy-making.
2. Provide education and training opportunities to current and future medical workforce professionals, to ensure preparedness in responding to climate-related health challenges in Western Australia.
3. Develop and fund local programs and infrastructure to respond to weather related health events and changing disease patterns.
4. Support and promote ongoing efforts by the Western Australian healthcare sector to reduce its environmental footprint, including facilitating sector-wide fossil fuel divestment.
5. Promote sustainable lifestyles and communities via public health campaigns on issues such as diet and active transport.

In addition, AMSA would like to recommend implementation of the Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Wellbeing by the Climate And Health Alliance (CAHA). This document provides a comprehensive, evidence-based roadmap for all levels of government in developing a climate-resilient, sustainable Australian healthcare system.

Recommendation 1: Research on Local Health Impacts

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A growing body of evidence indicates that of the developed countries, Australia is one of the most vulnerable to climate change. Climate change threatens to exacerbate current health inequities and poses a significant public health risk through more frequent extreme weather patterns, increased transmission of infectious diseases, a higher risk of heat-related illness, exacerbated allergic, lung and heart conditions, increased social, economic and environmental stresses that predispose to mental illness and undermined environmental health determinants including air quality, water and food security.

Specifically, Western Australia's geography means the state is particularly susceptible to extreme weather events including cyclones, heatwaves, bushfires, floods and droughts, direct impacts from fossil fuel extraction, rising sea levels and a loss of biodiversity in terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems found nowhere else on earth[i]. Moreover, the mining, agricultural and fisheries sectors make up over 42 percent of the total land use and 3 percent of employment in Western Australia, representing not only potential significant food insecurity, but also financial hardship and mental health impacts for workers as these industries become jeopardised by climate change[ii].

AMSA believes it is also important for the Western Australian Department of Health to advocate for increased transparency about existing emissions from fossil fuel projects such as the Wheatstone project, Australia's largest onshore liquified natural gas plant, which will enable a more accurate assessment of local health impacts from these projects[iii].

Moreover, it is known that the climate crisis' ramifications on healthcare are inequitably distributed, and disproportionately affect already vulnerable populations, such as children, the elderly, those with existing illness and disability, socioeconomically disadvantaged, rural and Indigenous Australians. Western Australia has a distinct distribution of these vulnerable groups compared to rest of Australia. 13 percent of the nation's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander citizens live in the state[iv], over 20 percent of all citizens live in regional and remote areas[v], Western Australia has largest projected population increase in Australia as the number of children and young people is expected to increase by 93 percent[vi].

It is thus imperative that climate health evidence informs Western Australian policy to best mitigate these impacts. Western Australia is a large and diverse region, and while AMSA applauds current research such as in "Health impacts of climate change:

Adaptation strategies for Western Australia", this research should be expanded to better investigate specific local health impacts of climate change in the state -- a deficit which must be addressed in coming years. Regional differences in the impacts of climate change mean that pressures on health systems will differ throughout Australia, and the Western Australian Department of Health must ensure that its own health system adaptation plan

reflects the unique health challenges that the Western Australian public is likely to face.

Recommendation 2: Climate and Health Education

Adaptation of the health workforce to is underpinned by the learning of appropriate skills to mitigate the impacts of climate change. A number of studies have indicated that medical students and doctors are conscious of the challenges that climate change will pose to Australian public health, but do not feel adequately prepared to meet these challenges in their clinical practice. In coming years, clinicians will increasingly need to have expertise in the varied and diverse health impacts of climate change, so as to be able to identify, prevent and manage climate-related health issues appropriately.

Although certain Australian medical schools have begun to introduce climate change into their curricula, this is not yet a consistent feature of Australian medical training. As such, educational initiatives that provide current and future members of the Western Australian medical workforce with the opportunity to build knowledge and skills in responding to climate-related health challenges would be a useful step towards ensuring the capacity of the sector to meet the challenges of climate change.

If implemented effectively, Western Australia has the opportunity to inform health sector preparedness across the rest of the nation, especially for rural health networks as the WA Country Health Service (WACHS) is the single largest country health system in Australia and presents key potential to lead national change[vii].

Recommendation 3: Improve Healthcare Sector Capacity and Preparedness

Climate change poses direct and indirect threats to human health and it is critical that health sector strategy and infrastructure is adequately equipped to deal with the increasing burden of disease from environmental changes. We support Western Australia's "State Hazard Plan for Heatwaves", however, we recommend the expansion of such Hazard Plans, vulnerability mapping and warning systems for other natural disasters, as well as increased simultaneous public health promotion to increase community engagement and awareness[viii].

We recommend expansion and ongoing investment in Notifiable Disease Surveillance networks, with a strong focus on disease outbreaks which may increase in severity and frequency as a result of climate change. Expansion of vulnerability mapping programs is important for the identification of vulnerable populations, and subsequent development of infrastructure, adaptation strategies and emergency response plans.

AMSA believes that these strategies will ensure that the threats that climate change poses to human health are identified and responded to appropriately, to ensure the health and well-being of the community.

Recommendation 4: Support Sustainability of Healthcare Sector

Recent research has indicated that Australia's healthcare sector contributes more than 7% of the nation's total carbon emissions, and that there is significant scope for the healthcare sector to reduce its own impact on the

environment. In the United Kingdom, the success of the National Health Service's Sustainable Development Unit in cutting emissions while increasing productivity indicates that improved healthcare sustainability and productivity are complementary objectives that can be realised simultaneously. We applaud the inclusion of an environmental sustainability recommendation for the Western Australian health sector in the "2019 Sustainable Health Review", and advocate for continued government funding and support to enable hospitals to become more resource- and energy-efficient[ix].

Meanwhile, divestment from fossil fuels represents an increasingly important aspect of climate change mitigation efforts, with health organisations such as the Royal Australian College of Physicians, Medibank, HCF, HESTA and Doctors for the Environment Australia all divesting from fossil fuels in the past few years. Furthermore, 12 councils in Western Australia, representing 30 percent of the state's residents and ratepayers, have committed to divestment[x]. In light of the short- and long-term health impacts of fossil fuel burning, divestment from fossil fuels should be encouraged and supported throughout the Western Australian healthcare sector.

Recommendation 5: Promote Sustainable Lifestyles and Communities

Many climate mitigation policies and strategies achieve better health outcomes, minimising the risks of climate change and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. However, for success in these strategies local communities and individuals need to be empowered to make a change to their current behaviours, for personal health and environmental health benefits. This will require enhancing the climate change and health literacy of the general population, engaging all members of the community-- without discrimination of gender, race, ethnicity, education, income, age, and ensuring material is culturally and linguistically diverse.

AMSA commends the goals in Western Australia's "Healthway Strategic Plan (2018-2023)" as well as the LiveLighter, Refresh.Ed, Crunch&Sip programs. AMSA recommends an expansion to include environmental health co-benefits into future promotional content. Additionally, involvement in successful international campaigns with similar values and outcomes, including the World Health Organization's BreatheLife 2030 campaign should be considered. The government should also consider promoting more plant-based diets, for environmental and health co-benefits[xi].

However, AMSA recognises the need for collaboration with stakeholders, including agriculture, to ensure a just transition toward more environmentally friendly food consumption.

Lastly, the Western Australian Department of Health is in a key position to increasingly advocate for a just transition away from fossil fuels, as it is widely recognised that the state has large potential for expanding the renewable energy sector, especially in wind and solar. This is doubly important at a time where many workers in the fossil fuel industry face increasing job insecurity and a need to re-train for a new profession[i].

Conclusion

Climate change has numerous impacts on health and shifts in healthcare infrastructure, education and community health promotion have the potential to

play an important role in safeguarding health both in Western Australia and nationally. As the representative body for Australia's future medical clinicians, AMSA applauds the Department of Health for conducting the first statutory inquiry of its kind in Australia, and advocates that the findings and outcome of the Inquiry are used to implement strong evidence-based and globally-consistent policy, development of the healthcare sector, and public health initiatives.



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