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Submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry 2019

The Doctors Reform Society is a health organisation which aims to improve health for all people in a socially just and equitable way. We believe that human health depends fundamentally on a healthy environment. We recognise the scientific consensus that anthropogenic global warming is occurring, that this is a great hazard to health, and that urgent action to combat this is required.¹

It is vital that Australian governments, including the Western Australian state government, respond to climate change not just as an environmental issue or an energy issue but also as a serious health issue. Thus, we welcome the Climate Health WA Inquiry and the opportunity to offer a brief submission to it.

Climate Change and Human Health

The current and potential future health implications of climate change are profound.^{2,3} Health impacts of climate change include both direct effects (heatwaves, storms, flooding, drought) and indirect effects (such as malnutrition due to food insecurity, displacement of populations due to rising sea levels, changing patterns of infectious diseases, mental illness, pollution-induced physical illness, and conflict).³ Health effects of climate change are expected to be greatest amongst socioeconomically deprived communities. Even now, climate change is estimated to cause hundreds of thousands of deaths annually, globally.⁴ As for the future, a recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found confidently that without substantial mitigation efforts, there is a “high to very high risk of severe, widespread and irreversible impacts globally” of climate change.⁵ Policies to mitigate climate change therefore need to be given great priority worldwide, including in Australia.

Western Australia is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Already our climate is hotter than previously, our sea levels are rising, and rainfall has declined significantly. These trends are projected to worsen, with consequent health effects.

We are very concerned about Australia’s poor progress towards mitigation of, and adaptation to climate change. Many Australian climate experts believe that Australia’s 2030 goals are an insufficient contribution towards the Paris agreement’s global goal of constraining global warming to 1.5 - 2 degrees centigrade.⁶ On current trends, experts believe Australia’s progress is insufficient to meet even these insufficient targets.^{7,8} We need much greater ambition and action across many sectors of Australian society to make better progress towards a safe future climate.

Climate Change, Sustainability and the WA Health System

Our health system must help our society mitigate and adapt to the health impacts of climate change. By adaptation, we mean planning for a health system that can respond to new changing health needs, including (amongst other threats) the increased disease burden associated with heat, changing patterns of infectious diseases, and the potentially severe mental health effects of climate change. Adaptation also includes ensuring that hospital and community-based health services are prepared for extreme weather events that are likely to damage the facilities themselves and/or surrounding infrastructure in ways that would impede the facility's ability to provide required services. By mitigation, we mean reducing global warming by reducing healthcare sector emissions, and by advocating for decreased emissions in other sectors.

The Doctors Reform Society, like many health organisations, is a member of the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA). We endorse the recommendations in the CAHA submission to the Climate Health WA Inquiry. Nevertheless, we hope that this separate submission may add weight to our concerns.

Within the health sector, we specifically recommend that the WA Health Department should do the following:

- Develop a state Climate and Health Policy. We commend to you as a model the “Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia” of the Climate and Health Alliance.⁹
- Assess the health impacts of climate change in Western Australia in order to develop a strategy for adaptation. One recent model is the recent Queensland Human Health and Wellbeing Climate Change Adaptation Plan (H-CAP).¹⁰
- The establishment of a unit to lead climate action and sustainability within the WA health system. We commend to you as a model the UK's Sustainable Development Unit, which in recent years has achieved significant net emissions reductions and net health system savings despite a significant increase in health system demand and activity over the same period.^{11,12}
- The funding of research into effective and innovative approaches to sustainability and emissions reductions within the health system
- Report regularly and publicly on performance against indicators of environmental sustainability
- Recognise the likely disproportionate impact of climate change on Aboriginal people, especially those living remotely, as poverty and infrastructural challenges magnify adverse climate impacts. Accordingly, the WA government should work closely with Aboriginal peoples in WA to identify specific health and climate risks and co-design a research and policy program to address Aboriginal needs as a result of climate change and potentially use Indigenous cultural knowledge and practice to inform mitigation and adaptation initiatives in WA.

Further, because policies outside the health sector affect climate change, and therefore have health impacts, we believe the WA Health Department should do the following:

- Endorse the recently-announced state Labor government aspiration to a net-zero emissions target by 2050
- Call for a planned transition to this net-zero emissions target, including an interim emissions reduction target of at least 65% on 2005 levels by 2030, in line with science and the Paris agreement.
- Advocate for no further fossil fuel developments in Western Australia, and for a planned winding down of current fossil fuel projects with appropriate vocational retraining plans to address job losses (Germany provides a model)
- Recognise the adverse contribution of air pollution to human health, and therefore advocate for appropriate air pollution standards

There are many more specific suggestions within the submission of the Climate and Health Alliance which we support, but will not reproduce here for reasons of brevity.

References

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