

Climate change is a health issue we need to treat

Katriona Wylie

You are the antibodies kicking in as the planet fights its fever.

– Bill McKibben¹

The World Health Organization acknowledges climate change as ‘the single biggest health problem facing humanity,’² joining multiple international bodies that name climate change as a serious threat. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC),³ the United Nations,⁴ the World Economic Forum⁵ and many others are pointing out the gravity of this problem and are crying out for urgent action to protect human civilisations. The IPCC’s AR6 2023 synthesis report states that we have heated our planet by 1.1°C since preindustrial times and are set to reach 1.5°C by the end of this decade.⁶ Already, we encounter the effects of this global heating on health, both in Australia and globally. We have increased severity and frequency of droughts, heatwaves, fires and floods, more extreme weather events, increased food and water insecurity, displacement, infectious diseases and mental illness all due to climate change.⁷

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and the Australia College of Rural and Remote Medicine (ACCRM) both recognise this pressing threat to human health. Both colleges have declared a climate health emergency and released position statements on the need for general

practitioners (GPs) to not only be aware of the health impacts, but also to act to reduce our carbon footprint and to protect our patients from the multiple health impacts that climate change brings.^{8–11} It is true that we need concerted global action from governments, industries and institutions, but as trusted health professionals,¹² GPs have an opportunity to advocate for climate action as vital to protect human health. Organisations, such as Doctors for the Environment Australia, use their voice to champion mitigation and adaptation strategies with governments and institutions, helping shape climate action. We also have an ethical responsibility to act. When we took the oath of the Declaration of Geneva, we pledged to dedicate our lives to the service of humanity,¹³ and we fail in that pledge if we do not address the existential threat of the climate crisis.^{14,15}

As GPs, there is much that we can do. First, we can understand the nature of the problem by learning about the health effects of climate change. We can then address the health effects and work to reduce the carbon footprint of our clinical work and our practice premises. This issue of *AJGP* looks at these factors. It outlines how we can make general practice sustainable so we can be community leaders in climate action, reduce our carbon footprint and save money in the process. It examines the immense psychological distress associated with climate change and looks at the emergence of Japanese encephalitis resulting from the changes in vector ecology that global warming has caused. It discusses

plant-rich diets as an avenue to improve patient outcomes while simultaneously having a positive effect on our planet’s health, which is an easily accessible modality for us all.

Climate change is a health issue. As GPs, we need to treat it, and this edition of *AJGP* shows us how.

Author

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