CLIMATE CHANGE & HEALTH PROMOTION:
POSITION PAPER

AUSTRALIAN HEALTH PROMOTION ASSOCIATION JUNE 27 2024

ABOUT US

Incorporated in 1990, the Australian Health Promotion Association (AHPA®) is the only professional association specifically for people interested or involved in the practice, policy, research, and study of health promotion. Our member-driven national Association represents over 1000 members and subscribers and is governed by a Board at the national level with operational branches representing all states and territories. Membership of AHPA is diverse, and includes designated health promotion practitioners, researchers, and students, as well as others involved in promoting physical, mental, social, cultural, and environmental health, whose primary profession or area of study may be something different, but whose responsibilities include promoting health. Members represent a broad range of sectors including health, education, welfare, environment, transport, law enforcement, town planning, housing, and politics. They are drawn from government departments and agencies, universities, non-government organisations, community-based organisations and groups, private companies, and students.

Our activities include: national registration of health promotion practitioners via the International Union for Health Promotion and Education; national health promotion university learning and teaching network; early career support; national and local conferences and events; a tri-yearly Population Health Congress (with partners: Public Health Association of Australia, Australasian Epidemiological Association and Australasian Faculty of Public Health Medicine); a website providing professional and membership information; a national listserv providing members with sector news, employment, advocacy and events information; stakeholder and member communication across a range of platforms; advocacy action; strong partnership working with a range of organisations; awards; traineeships; mentoring; scholarships and bursaries; and the Health Promotion Journal of Australia, which has a strong focus on health equity and participation by First Nations people.

OUR VISION

A healthy, equitable Australia.

OUR PURPOSE

Leadership, advocacy and workforce development for health promotion practice, research, evaluation, and policy.

OUR PRINCIPLES

- Ethical practice - Supporting culturally informed, participatory, respectful, & safe practice.
- Health equity - Addressing the sociocultural, economic, political, commercial, and ecological determinants of health in order to build health equity.
- Innovative and evidence informed approaches - Promoting and supporting evidence informed research, policy, and practice.
- Collaboration - Working in partnership with other organisations to improve health & wellbeing

OUR STRATEGY

1. Promote our profession and members
2. Advocate for health promotion
3. Build professional capacity of AHPA members
4. Support career pathways in health promotion
5. Promote equity, diversity and inclusion
6. Provide responsible and sustainable governance and management

Australia is one of the healthiest countries in the world. This is largely because of effective public health and its core services – protection, prevention and health promotion which includes action to create and support the ecological conditions that enable Australians to enjoy a healthy and happy life. Health promotion's role has never been so significant. This position paper reaffirms commitment by AHPA to planetary health and the critical role of health promotion in addressing climate change impacts.

KEY MESSAGES

- Urgent action to equitably respond to the impacts of climate change will save lives, protect and improve health and wellbeing, locally and globally, and provide wider societal and economic benefits.
- Accelerated and increased resourcing, investment, and strategy are required to strengthen legislative and policy agendas that embed a health promotion lens to a just transition, net-zero economy, mitigation and adaptation.
- Climate action for health and wellbeing will require investment and collaboration across public, private, and non-government organisations, within and beyond the health sector.
- Delays in addressing climate change will worsen and widen existing health and social inequities and undermine decades of health promotion efforts and advancements to optimise health and wellbeing.
- The health promotion workforce has a critical role in enabling, mediating, and advocating for equitable, health and wellbeing-centred, climate change action.

AHPA'S POSITION

The Australian Health Promotion Association:
- Recognises that climate change is a public health emergency that requires ambitious, accelerated and wide-ranging action.
- Advocates for policies that fulfil individuals' and communities' right to health, including actions that ensure access to healthy environments and environmental conditions that promote optimum health and well-being, now including for future generations.
- Emphasises the important role of health promotion and the health promotion workforce in addressing the wider determinants of health, including climate change and its impact on health equity.

AHPA RESOLVES TO:

- Actively advocate at all levels of government for policies that promote healthy, sustainable, regenerative and just systems and societies.
- Provide health promotion leadership and mediate within and across sectors for collective action to promote positive and equitable climate and health outcomes.
- Leverage the trusted position and expertise of the health promotion workforce to raise awareness of the health imperative for climate action.
- Build the capacity of AHPA members and the broader health promotion workforce around the opportunities for action on climate and health.
- Support contributions to the climate change and health evidence base through the Health Promotion Journal of Australia and other AHPA platforms.
- Ensure planetary health is a focus of professional development & capacity-building efforts.
- Reduce AHPA's carbon and environmental footprint across our work practices, procurement and operations.
- Strong support for alignment with international policy, including the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

BACKGROUND

CLIMATE CHANGE AND ITS IMPACT ON HEALTH

Climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity. It is increasingly and substantially impacting human health and livelihoods, along with the economic and natural systems that people need for good health (1). Climate change refers to long-term changes in the state of the climate, driven by natural variations and, to a greater extent, human activities (anthropogenic influences). Climate systems are rapidly changing, as observed through global warming and its impacts on the atmosphere, land, cryosphere, biosphere, and ocean. Human-induced drivers are primarily due to greenhouse gases emitted by the combustion of fossil fuels (petroleum, coal, natural gas), aerosols and their precursors, and land-use changes. (2)

The cascading and compounding impacts of anthropogenic climate change are detrimental to all human and planetary health dimensions. Physical, mental, social, and cultural health are increasingly at risk from climate change and the accelerated frequency and intensity of extreme weather events such as fires, floods and heatwaves, displacement, worsening air quality, changes in the spread of infectious diseases, and risks to water and food security. Recent projections from the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change show all tracked health dimensions are predicted to worsen as the climate continues to change. (3)

The combined climate, nature and biodiversity 'triple planetary crisis' we are currently facing, is driving multiple and interlinked environmental, social, economic and health challenges. (4) Australia, as with many other countries has experienced rising incidence of infectious and non-communicable disease, injury, malnutrition, threats to mental health, involuntary migration and displacement.(5,6) Climate change continues to threaten conditions for health and well-being, including housing and living conditions, built and natural environments and ecosystems, and health-supporting infrastructure. It also impacts workplace environments and livelihoods.(7)

THE ROLE OF HEALTH PROMOTION IN CLIMATE CHANGE ACTION

Health Promotion has always had a stated commitment to the ecological determinants of health. Since the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion, a focus on sustainability has been central, noting:

"...the inextricable links between people and their environment constitute the basis for a socioecological approach to health. The overall guiding principle for the world, nations, regions and communities alike, is the need to encourage reciprocal maintenance - to take care of each other, our communities and our natural environment. The conservation of natural resources throughout the world should be emphasized as a global responsibility." (8)

Whilst the health threats of climate change are increasing, the health imperative to urgently address climate change is growing. There is increasing recognition of the benefits of embedding health and wellbeing as a foundational element of effective climate policy and action, and a need to move beyond the narrative that positions health as a secondary 'co-benefit'.

Now is the time for transformative climate change action that promotes and protects human and environmental health and addresses planetary health inequities. Health-promoting climate change action must occur at speed and scale, span the spectrum of mitigation and adaptation (9), and work towards intergenerational health equity and climate justice.

As a discipline and profession, health promotion is well-positioned to address planetary health challenges. A range of opportunities exist to deliver programs, policies and actions that improve health and climate justice outcomes. These include (this is not an exhaustive list):

- Promoting a transition to, and uptake of, healthy, affordable, low-carbon diets
- Supporting food sovereignty and resilient local food systems
- Increasing equitable access to healthy and sustainable built environments and transport
- Increasing equitable access to healthy and affordable housing and energy
- Increasing nature-based interventions
- Supporting environments and opportunities that enable active transport
- Building community resilience and social connection
- Promoting locally-informed and sustainable heat-coping behaviours
- Supporting action on circular and wellbeing economies
- Addressing the determinants of planetary health inequities
- Increasing capacity for generation of health and climate change research

CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH EQUITY

The multiple and compounding impacts of climate change are widening health and social inequities and challenging the foundations underpinning human health. (11) The people and communities most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change are often those that have historically contributed the least to climate change and have the fewest resources to cope. (12) The 6th Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report states that in Australia:

"Existing vulnerabilities expose and exacerbate inequalities between rural, regional and urban areas, Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, those with health and disability needs, and between generations, incomes and health status, increasing the relative climate change risk faced by some groups and places". (13)

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be resourced and empowered to lead, preserve and generate cultural knowledge and practices to inform and address climate and health equity challenges. (14) Many concepts of planetary health are represented within a Western worldview, highlighting the importance of the wisdom, voices and knowledge systems of past and current generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in understanding and addressing the climate crisis. (15,16) The Lowitja Institute's 'Climate Change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health' discussion paper highlights colonialism as a key structural driver of climate change and its disproportionate impact on First Nations peoples, stating:

"Colonisation created disparities in health and wellbeing between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous Australians through dispossession of traditional land and waterways, suppression of culture and disempowerment. Climate change is compounding these historical injustices, increasing inequities and feelings of powerlessness as communities despair over the desecration of their land-, water- and seascapes".

A rights-based, holistic and inclusive approach is required to simultaneously support climate action and health and wellbeing, while also redressing these systems and injustices. Approaches must be oriented to addressing the systems and structural drivers of social inequity and climate change to enable planetary health equity. (17) Health promotion action on the social determinants of health can equitably support both health and climate resilience by creating just social and economic policies, practices, and systems that promote fairer distributions of power and opportunity. (18) At a local level, health promotion practice that enables communities and community groups to advocate and lead climate change transformation is essential, including and elevating the voices of diverse groups experiencing multiple and intersecting inequalities, and systems and structures of injustice and marginalisation.(19)

AHPA SEEKS THE FOLLOWING ACTIONS:

- Phase out existing, and disallow construction of any new, coal-fired power stations, coal mines, or oil and gas infrastructure.
- Urgent investment in renewable energy sources and infrastructure, with an equitable and just transition that includes engagement with communities at the frontline.
- Commitment to a reduction in national greenhouse gas emissions of 75% below 2005 levels by 2030 and net zero emissions by 2035 for all sectors, including healthcare.
- Mandate a cross-sector 'health in all policies' approach in all public policy and decision-making to ensure health and equity impacts are considered.
- Embed recognition of climate justice and equity, and the relationship between climate change and the social, cultural, political, commercial, economic and ecological determinants of health in all policy decisions.
- Adequately resource and empower communities, community services and health organisations to support place-based adaptation and build local resilience to climate threats.
- Ensure the National Climate and Health Strategy (including the National Health Adaptation Plan) is appropriately funded, resourced and governed.
- Ensure the National Housing and Homelessness Plan acknowledges and addresses factors that influence the inequitable health impacts of housing and climate change (including climate and health considerations in urban planning, building rating systems, residential building standards, minimum standards for rental properties, and incentives to retrofit existing housing to be more energy efficient, etc.).
- Strengthen policies and increase investment in sustainable public and active transport, including cycling and walking infrastructure, that promotes safe and equitable connectedness for all (including increasing the transport budget towards "non-motorised transport" from 0.1-2% up to 20% in alignment with United Nations recommendations).
- Improve recognition of the health, social, economic, commercial, cultural, political and ecological dimensions of the food system to ensure holistic, integrated and ecologically sustainable food and nutrition policies and programs (including the incorporation of food security into Australia's food regulatory system including the Food Standards Australia and New Zealand Act 1991 and the Australian Dietary Guidelines).
- Recognise and formalise opportunities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, decision-making, knowledge, and power-sharing to address climate change and protect First Nations country, culture and well-being.
- Addition of climate and health indicators within the Measuring What Matters framework.
- Supporting action and awareness of the commercial, economic and political determinants of health, specifically against the harmful corporate and political influence and practice of the fossil fuel industry (including removal of fossil fuel subsidies, banning political donations, supporting anti-greenwashing laws, divestment, removing sponsorships, etc.)
- Increased investment in climate-health research and data relevant to health promotion, with additional opportunities for First Nations-led research.
- Strengthen the focus on climate change action as a public health imperative (across promotion, prevention, and protection) in national and jurisdictional health policies, strategies, and frameworks.
- Support action to facilitate Australia's commitment to the Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

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