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## **AMA submission to Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment – National Climate Resilience and Adaptation Strategy (the Strategy)**

Via [haveyoursay.awe.gov.au](https://haveyoursay.awe.gov.au)

### **1. Climate adaptation and resilience building can take many forms. How is your organisation adapting or planning to adapt to the impacts of climate change?**

The Australian Medical Association advocates on behalf of Australian doctors and in the interests of the health of all Australians. Our climate change response is a strong component of this work as we plan for the future.

The AMA has advocated strongly for the Australian Government to increase climate change mitigation efforts through a more ambitious emissions reductions policy, and an active transition to renewable energy. Our support for a net zero by 2050 target, including support for Zali Steggall's proposed [Climate Change Bills](#), is firmly grounded in our concern about the growing health impacts of warming temperatures. The AMA considers our advocacy on climate change mitigation and adaptation to be inherently linked, as the level of climate change we experience will have significant effects on the level of adaptation required.

The AMA has called for the development of an [Australian Sustainable Development Unit](#) to guide emissions reduction and reduce the environmental footprint of the health sector. An SDU is important for resilience and adaptation along with mitigation, ensuring health facilities are equipped to manage disasters and minimising their own impact on rising temperatures.

We have also advocated for a government-led National Climate Change and Health Strategy, to guide collaboration across sectors and set out a comprehensive and broad-reaching adaptation plan. The AMA has been pleased to note progress on adaptation at a state and territory level, including the [Health and Wellbeing Climate Adaptation Plan](#) in Queensland, the Victorian Government's [Health and Human Services Adaptation Action Plan](#), and the [Climate Health WA Inquiry](#). However, climate health impacts do not respect state borders, and decisive national leadership on adaptation in the health sector is required.

With regard to our corporate operations, the AMA has committed a significant amount of company assets to long term returns from investment in the global equity investment

market. The AMA is committed to and focussed on issues of ethical and sustainable investing. This focus is grounded in an investment policy that prohibits investment in companies that display a poor occupational health record, infringe human rights, or cause unacceptable environmental damage. The AMA is in the process of further actively targeting those investments that can display and measure a particular environment, social or governance impact.

## **2. What kinds of information do you think would help you take further steps to become more resilient to the impacts of climate change?**

As tracked by three iterations of the [Lancet-MJA Countdown on Health and Climate Change](#), the health impacts of climate change are already being experienced in Australia. These include increasing mortality and exacerbations of chronic disease from extreme heat, the respiratory and cardiovascular impacts of bushfire smoke exposure, rising mental ill-health, and lessening labour capacity, among others. Australian health systems, facilities and professionals are adapting to these effects in a range of ways, from [transitioning](#) to more sustainable forms of energy, to [informing patients](#) about health impacts and adaptive behaviours, and [coordinating](#) flexible primary health services in emergency situations.

To inform further adaptation and resilience in the health sector, research on the health impacts of climate change should be conducted and publicly communicated. For example, research on the long-term impacts of prolonged particulate matter exposure, like what was seen in eastern Australia in the 2019-20 bushfire season, is necessary to plan appropriate measures for future bushfire seasons. Clear information on the increased capacity of vector-borne diseases, including dengue fever, malaria, and other mosquito-borne diseases, is also needed. Routine identification and publication of climate-related illness and mortality would assist health services in planning for predicted increases in burden of disease and hospital presentations.

The AMA has advocated for some time for the establishment of an [Australian National Centre for Disease Control](#), which would provide national leadership and coordination on rapid public health responses to communicable disease outbreaks, as well as proactively tracking and researching increases in chronic disease. Importantly, a National CDC would provide a centralized form of health information, educate the public about large-scale disease threats, and provide up-to-date, relevant advice about how to prevent ill-health. During the 2019-20 bushfire season in Australia, there was confusion in the community about health threats, especially the impact of smoke inhalation and how best to protect against this (i.e., where to source information about pollutant levels; what kind of mask or air purifier to use). A CDC would provide a trusted, nationally consistent source of advice on issues such as this during future crises

While inarguably necessary to address the health impacts that cannot be avoided, adaptation and resilience efforts cannot be relied upon exclusively to address climate health impacts. As outlined in the recent IPCC [6<sup>th</sup> Assessment Report](#), every fraction of a degree of warming will have significant health implications. Mitigating further increases in global warming is the best way to reduce climate health impacts and to ensure that adaptation and resilience measures are effective. All Australians, including medical and health professionals, need assurances that the Australian Government is genuinely committed to reducing emissions as quickly as possible, including a significantly increased national contribution to the Paris Agreement; transparent, timely and

regular publishing of information on emissions trajectories; and well-communicated plans for a just transition for workers in outgoing industries.

**3. The Strategy will provide a roadmap to enhance our national climate adaptation and resilience efforts. Considering the roles and responsibilities factsheet, how do you think the Commonwealth Government could improve delivery of its roles and responsibilities for climate adaptation and resilience in Australia?**

The AMA has reviewed the roles and responsibilities fact sheet and finds it to be largely theoretical, making it unclear how it would be applied in reality. Further – the abrogation of Commonwealth responsibilities from the individual circumstances of Australian citizens is a questionable basis for climate adaptation policy. The roles and responsibilities document relies on a neat distinction between the private responsibilities of citizens and the Commonwealth in adapting to climate change, along with joint cooperation with states and territories on theoretically agreed goals. With Commonwealth and state and territory governments currently exercising far reaching powers under public health orders, limiting personal freedoms and stalling market activities to prevent the spread of COVID-19 – the AMA regards the roles and responsibilities document to be deeply contradictory to current public policy settings.

With regard to the Strategy itself - the AMA is highly concerned that responsibility for climate adaptation and resilience policy within the Commonwealth Government has been clearly delineated from climate mitigation policy. From a health sector perspective, these policies are interlinked and interdependent. As outlined above, successful adaptation to the health effects of climate change relies on the minimisation of further warming, via effective and ambitious efforts at mitigation. The fact that climate adaptation and mitigation policies are currently under the remit of two separate departments should not prevent them from being integrated into one strategy, or the development of integrated, sector-specific strategies. Indeed – this work is relevant to all Commonwealth departments and should be inclusive of multiple portfolio areas. The Commonwealth Government’s decision to exclude mitigation from this policy process undermines the expertise and evidence that underpins climate change policy and is deeply disappointing.

The AMA strongly recommends that the Commonwealth Department of Health lead the development of a National Climate Change and Health Strategy, to guide adaptation within the health sector, link with adaptation plans in other sectors, and guide emissions reduction in health - integrated with economy-wide emissions reduction policy. State and territory governments clearly have an important role to play in informing and implementing this Strategy, but leadership must come from the Commonwealth Government. It is not enough to rely on disparate efforts at a jurisdictional level, regardless of their positive intent. Similarly, a national-level Sustainable Development Unit is needed to incentivise, promote and guide sustainability efforts in health facilities – from local GP clinics to large tertiary hospitals. Initiatives by individual health facilities to increase sustainability are encouraging, but a national unit is required to ensure the whole health sector is on board.

Climate and health stakeholders are providing invaluable guidance on adaptation in our sector as part of this consultation process. We reiterate that the adverse impacts of climate change will be more severe for disadvantaged populations and ask that these groups are not forgotten in this policy development process. It remains unclear how this public consultation will inform the final

Strategy, as no draft has been provided to consider in the formulation of our response. The AMA supports the issues many groups raised in the consultation – namely that climate change mitigation cannot be divorced from climate change adaptation simply for ease and convenience in policy design. Implementation and accountability levers are also absent from the information provided in this consultation, so it remains to be understood as to how the Strategy is intended to be applied.

Climate change is presenting humanity with seriously complex challenges that are inviting us to rethink many systems and structures that we have taken for granted for too long. The AMA calls on the Commonwealth Government to provide an appropriately considered response, taking into account these complexities, and the strong desire from the health sector to see leadership and action on emissions reduction and climate change adaptation.

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