

SUBMISSION

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AMA submission to the Environment and Communications Legislation Committee – Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023

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Introduction

The AMA supports the *Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023* to require decision makers to consider the health and wellbeing of children in Australia when making significant decisions. However, the AMA believes that the word 'children' should be changed to 'current and future generations' to recognise that climate change impacts all generations. The AMA recommends that the Bill's scope is expanded to also require decision makers to consider One Health impacts; a concept which recognises the inextricable link between human, animal, and environmental health.

Climate change is a health emergency, with clear evidence indicating severe impacts for our people and communities now and into the future. The AMA believes that government has a duty of care to protect future generations from the health impacts of climate change.

The AMA believes that this Bill will provide better accountability measures to enhance climate action. While the current government has improved on decades of inaction, the AMA believes the urgency of acting on climate change is not adequately reflected in Australia's policies and programs. While some areas of government are taking action, other areas are still implementing policies and programs that will continue to exacerbate the impacts of climate change.

Our current systems are too siloed to achieve the level of collaboration and action needed to prevent and adapt to the health impacts of climate change.

This Bill is an essential starting point and paves the way for governments and disciplines other than health to be considering health and wellbeing impacts for future generations.

Duty of Care

The AMA recognises that future generations are going to face the full consequences of a changing climate, and the Bill should be worded to include 'current and future generations' instead of just 'children'. While the AMA agrees that it is essential to protect the health and wellbeing of children, climate change impacts all generations and therefore the Bill should protect all generations. To ensure a safe future and liveable environment for future generations, we need to transform our energy systems and economy at speed to reduce the dependence on fossil fuels. The AMA recently suggested that the Australian Government's National Early Years Strategy identify climate change as a critical factor for child health and wellbeing.¹ In 2022, the AMA and other leading health and welfare groups called on all political parties to look to the future by focusing on child health, including impacts on climate change action.²

Health impacts of climate change

It is essential that the committee consider the health impacts of climate change in its recommendations for the Bill. The health impacts and risks of climate change (including climate-related disasters) are broad, resulting in an increased frequency of disease outbreaks (zoonotic, vector-borne) and environmental catastrophes such as drought, floods, bushfires that could impact food and water security and basic sanitation. Australia is also seeing an increase in the incidence of respiratory illnesses resulting from air pollution and inhalation of toxins. Additionally, mental health issues are on the rise. Inter-generational farming practices, jobs and livelihoods are at great risk of change and/or decline resulting from climate change, as well as general mood and wellbeing of people (particularly in the aged population) in times of temperature stress. A comprehensive table can be found in Appendix 1.

The AMA recognises that to minimise the impact of climate change, Australia's current target is to reach net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050.³ There are a range of Australian Government strategies that aim to achieve this.⁴ For example, the Safeguard Mechanism aims to obligate facilities to manage their net emissions if they exceed the Safeguard threshold for Scope 1 (i.e. direct) emissions.^{5,6} The AMA also welcomes the establishment of the National Health Sustainability and Climate Unit within the Department of Health and Aged Care and the development of a National Health and Climate Strategy.

However, in Australia at the time of writing, there are 29 proposed new coal mines which will create 12.8 billion tonnes of emissions over their lifetime.⁷ As of March 2023, there were 116 new coal, oil, and gas projects currently in the approval process. Annual emissions from these projects are expected to be almost three times Australia's 2021-22 emissions (490 million tonnes).⁸ Approving new fossil fuel projects is in direct conflict with protecting Australia's future generations from the impacts of climate change.

Fossil fuel companies make large contributions to political parties.^{9,10} This creates a conflict of interest where there is potential for climate change action and policies to be influenced by commercial and vested interests. Some political parties have committed to denying contributions from the tobacco industry and the AMA believes the same should apply to the fossil fuel industry. The AMA advocates for climate change policy to be scientifically evidence-based and free from political interference.

In 2022-23, fossil fuel subsidies were at \$11.1 billion.¹¹ A large proportion of Australia's fossil fuel resources are exported for use in other countries. The Australian Government needs to implement an

urgent transition of fossil fuel subsidies to renewable energy, while ensuring Australia's energy requirements are met. This should include support for fossil fuel workers to transition to other areas of work, to prevent the health and social impacts of losing income.

Informed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Synthesis report and the proposed United Nations Climate Solidarity Pact Acceleration Agenda, the AMA supports:

- Australia reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2040
- no new fossil fuel (coal and gas) projects in Australia
- ending the ability for fossil fuel companies to donate to political parties
- transitioning fossil fuel subsidies to renewable energy.^{12,13}

Climate policies can have public health benefits beyond their intended impact on the climate. These health benefits should be promoted as a public health opportunity, with significant potential to offset some costs associated with addressing climate change.

One Health

The AMA recommends that the Bill's scope is expanded to obligate decision makers to consider One Health impacts in addition to the impacts of climate change on children health and wellbeing. This Bill aligns with the One Health concept, however climate change is one aspect of a broader problem recognised under One Health. The One Health concept recognises that human, animal, and environmental health are inextricably linked. A One Health approach to policy, legislation, programs, and research is where multiple disciplines work collaboratively to improve public health outcomes and strive for a more sustainable planet.^{14,15} A One Health approach should be applied at all policy levels (including local, regional, federal, and global) in all disciplines to avoid jurisdictions working in silos.

The AMA calls for National Environmental Standards to include consideration of a One Health approach through Health Impact Assessments for projects and proposals. Environmental policies and programs need to better consider the human health impacts that are associated with a loss in biodiversity, unhealthy ecosystems, and green and blue spaces in urban environments. If new or expanded fossil fuel projects are to be considered, then health impacts must be given greater weight when assessing these and any project that potentially impacts on the environment. While health is considered in some aspects of the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water work, there is an opportunity to improve outcomes by passing this Bill and through better collaboration under a One Health approach and integration of a Health in All Policies (HiAP) approach across departments.

The AMA supports a HiAP approach. HiAP acknowledges that human health and health equity is influenced by more than the health system itself.¹⁶ Environmental, social, cultural, and commercial determinants of health should be considered in policies, sectors, and services that influence the following; environment, agriculture, the economy, finance, transport, housing, urban planning, and education.¹⁷ HiAP and One Health are complementary concepts that promote intersectoral action for mutual benefit. In addition to what is required under this Bill, as each Parliamentary Bill or legislative instrument requires a Statement of Compatibility with human rights, Bills should also consider and address the impact on the health of humans, animals, and the environment.

Conclusion

The AMA supports the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023 as it aims to protect current and future generations from the health and wellbeing impacts of climate change. The AMA recommends that the Bill's scope is expanded to include One Health impacts in addition to climate change impacts. The AMA believes that this Bill is essential to create better accountability and better climate change action. This Bill aligns with the AMA's support for Australia to introduce a One Health approach to recognise and act on the inextricable links between human, animal, and environmental health.

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Appendix 1: Examples of the health impacts of climate change

Health impact	Examples
Food, water, and vector-borne diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zoonotic disease outbreaks are increasing in frequency and are influenced by climate change, environmental destruction, urbanisation, human encroachment on natural habitats, global trade, and travel.^{18,19} Transmission of mosquito-borne diseases such as Dengue and Japanese Encephalitis is increasing due to changes in temperature, rainfall, humidity, and mosquito populations.²⁰ Climate change events can increase the risk of food- and water-borne diseases, such as through unsafe drinking/cleaning water after a flooding event.²¹
Respiratory illness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Smoke inhalation from bushfires is associated with deaths, hospitalisations and Emergency Department admissions, cardiovascular and respiratory problems.^{22,23,24} Increased risk of cardiovascular and respiratory disease, lung cancer, diabetes, neurological disorders, adverse pregnancy outcomes from air pollution.²⁵
Nutrition-based illness due to food and water insecurity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased land and water temperatures are associated with shortened crop growth seasons and risks fish stocks, respectively. Droughts, fires and floods can destroy crops, kill livestock, and contaminate drinking water.²⁶
Direct injuries from natural disasters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Heatwave mortality. Drowning, injuries, and infections from floodwater, including impact from debris. Burns and deaths from bushfires.²⁷
Mental health issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct effects: heatwaves, increases in temperature, and humidity is associated with worsened mental health outcomes and increased risk of suicide.²⁸ Indirect effects: mental health impacts from losing income due to an extreme event, increases in conflict and violence, displacement, and migration.²⁹

Health impact	Examples
Biodiversity loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A loss in biodiversity can risk the availability of food and water sources, new medicines, the emergence of pests and diseases.^{30,31}
Social, economic, and national security issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work insecurity – labour capacity is lessened during extreme weather events such as heatwaves. Working in extreme conditions can cause injury and death.³² Housing and homelessness issues due to displacement after extreme weather events and sea level rising.³³ Climate change effects disproportionately impact already vulnerable populations, such as children and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³⁴

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