

**Australian Medical Association Limited**

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**Transcript:** AMA Vice President, Dr Chris Zappala, ABC Radio Brisbane, *Mornings with Rebecca Levingstone*, Tuesday, 3 September 2019

**Subject:** Climate Change

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**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** Climate change is real, it's irrefutable, and it will make you sick, hurt you, or kill you. That's not a slogan written on a sign at an Extinction Rebellion protest. It's not a claim coming from a so-called extremist. It's the policy position your doctors have released today.

The Australian Medical Association is formally recognising climate change as a health emergency. Dr Chris Zappala is Vice President of the Australian Medical Association. Chris, why is climate change a health emergency?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Good morning, Rebecca. The AMA has long thought that climate change had great concern for us as a species, and specifically in terms of its impact on health. Beyond the obvious of extremes in weather, which I think most people could envisage in their minds, we've got to think of how that flows through to, for example, food production and lifestyle in various communities around the world.

We're not just talking in capital cities in Australia obviously, more extremes in weather such as high rain fall, and floods, and also droughts, but also the very specific effects of, for example, pollution, which have been estimated in the many billions of dollars if not more than that. And there's no question that there are direct harmful effects from pollutions around the world that have been documented.

It's not just the AMA, by the way. I mean, medical associations around the world are thinking similarly. So the American Medical Association, the British Medical Association, and the World Health Organisation all think similarly, and the AMA really is just coming into line with those views, and we believe that more can and should be done.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** What's prompted this statement now, Chris? And was it controversial within the medical community of Australia?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** This was not controversial at the Federal Council of the Australian Medical Association, where it was passed recently; it's an evolution of our thinking. We've always had a position on climate change that there are significant and worrying health effects that need to be borne in mind, and that more action needs to be taken. As I say, it was not controversial at our meetings and policy generating bodies at all. We felt that there was definitely a need to increase the attention and also the spotlight on the requirement for action to not just stabilise things but really hopefully reverse them. And that's why we've taken this move recently.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** Dr Chris Zappala, Vice President of the AMA, based in Brisbane. Today the Australian Medical Association has declared climate change a health emergency. I'm keen to hear from you this morning. Does this make you think about climate

change differently? Does it shift your attitude when it is a group of doctors making warnings about your health? 1300-222-612, give me a call.

Chris, I want to go through the series of claims the AMA has made on what climate change will do to people's health. Climate change will cause higher mortality and morbidity from heat stress. What are you basing that on?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** So, there's lots of evidence and if we look, for example, at the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which is a United Nations body, they released a report last year which we commented on. And there's a large body of literature around the world that is pulled together very nicely in that report that shows that when you get extremes in weather, that does cause problems from health, and the obvious one is heat stress, and heat stroke, and death from that, and we do see higher mortality at those times, even in Australia, when those events occur.

But, as I say, it's also the flow-through effects to our water systems, our water availability, our food production possibilities, the direct effects of smog. I'm a respiratory physician, for example, and there's no question there's very compelling evidence that pollution causes direct harmful effects on the respiratory system, disease that is potentially life limiting. So there's actually quite a large body of evidence that shows that these effects can occur. For example also, water and food borne illnesses, when you're getting changes in supply, and flooding events, and these sorts of things the chance of those sorts of related illnesses. Look at the cholera peaks, for example, when you have natural emergencies. So all these things become much more problematic. So it's that composite of thinking that leads to that statement there.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** We often think of floods, cyclones, fires in the realm of emergency workers. Are doctors wanting to have a greater say in that in terms of warning people about the increasing frequency and intensity of these events?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** I think the AMA's desire is to say that we feel that the scientific evidence is credible, we feel that there is more that can be done. There are clearly health effects of these negative impacts that are being seen around the world. We understand that there are economic imperatives and outcomes that need to be looked at as well. We're not for a moment suggesting that that needs to be ignored. So the-

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** [Interrupts] But are you suggesting that in the future, Chris Zappala, the economic consequences of illness, injury, and death from climate change will outweigh some of the immediate economic levers or imperatives that are being focused on now?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Yes. There is a strong suggestion in the literature that that is true and that is why action now - because clearly it's going to have a significant lag time - but action now is required to reverse those trends. And if we just look, for example, at the last century rate of global warming, the increase by a degree for example and the changes that that has brought in weather patterns and water supply and so on, there's really quite compelling evidence there and we clearly can't let that trend just continue unchecked.

So, there is opportunity here for us to do more and, as doctors, the Australian Medical Association is just saying that we agree with that and we support any attempt to shift to, for example, renewable energy sources, to a more healthy lifestyle that doesn't focus on a single individual in a car, for example, that acknowledges the deleterious effects of pollutions in our environment, and looks at sustainable ways of producing food and protecting water resources. I think these sound very basic when you say them like that, but that is what's under threat if we do nothing here.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** Climate change is a health emergency - the declaration from the Australian Medical Association this morning. Dr Chris Zappala, what do you say to people who doubt you? Who think you are exaggerating? And, in some cases, that will be politicians.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, I'd ask them first of all to keep a more open mind, and I'd ask them to take advice from people who have invested a lot of time and energy, and have true understanding and knowledge of the evidence in this space, and to listen to what those people are telling them and be prepared to take action on that basis.

The Australian Medical Association feels that the evidence is quite compelling, and we have come to that decision. As I said, it's been an evolution over time. We've had a climate change position for many, many years, but the difference more recently is we're saying: hang on, this looks like it might be starting to get away from us a little bit. We need to do more and-

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** [Interrupts] So what more do you want? Because a lot of politicians will say: the transition to renewables is underway. We acknowledged the science of climate change. We are reacting. What more are you calling for?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, I think it needs to be a little bit more urgency to what we're seeing being done. And, for example, the targets that we are heading towards, some people have said: well, if world temperatures rise to two degrees, for example, from pre-industrial levels then that's going to be manageable and let's make that our target. But in fact, that is associated with significant problems in terms of those issues that we were talking about before - water, food, vector illnesses, and so on. And so, a target that's much more conservative than that, which will require more aggressive action, is the sort of thing that we're looking at. But, for example, also looking very specifically at the pollution rates and how we manage that in this country, and recognising the health effects of those sorts of influences as well.

So it's really just about the pace of things. The science is compelling and we need to do more quicker so that in 10, 20, 30, 50 years' time we're not in real trouble.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** And if we don't pick up the pace, what will happen?

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Well, we're in danger of seeing a worsening of those climatic-related events that we've seen in recent times. So I think more unstable weather in terms of drought and flooding, more unstable food resources, thinking particularly - obviously of countries not such as Australia - thinking more globally, greater threat of vector-borne illnesses - so looking at, for example, water related events, if we all start getting water tanks and doing those sorts of

things, we're going to increase the illness associated with mosquito-borne illnesses et cetera. So, it's just an extension of all those things that we're seeing currently happening to a much greater extent than I think any of us would feel comfortable with or desire.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** Chris, I appreciate your time this morning. Thanks so much.

**CHRIS ZAPPALA:** Good morning.

**REBECCA LEVINGSTON:** Dr Chris Zappala from the Australian Medical Association who, just a few hours ago, formally recognised climate change as a health emergency.

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