

# RACGP submission to the Climate Change Amendment - Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity Bill

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## Introduction

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity Bill 2023)<sup>1</sup>, led by Senator David Pocock.

The RACGP is Australia's largest professional general practice organisation, representing over 46,000 members working in or toward a specialty career in general practice including four out of five general practitioners (GPs) in rural Australia.

The RACGP sets and maintains the standards for high-quality general practice care in Australia and advocates on behalf of the general practice discipline and our patients. As a national peak body, our core commitment is to support GPs and their broader healthcare team to address the primary healthcare needs of the Australian population.

## Executive Summary

The Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023 seeks to amend the Climate Change Act 2022 to require decision makers to consider the wellbeing of current and future children when making certain decisions that are likely to contribute to climate change.

The Duty of Care Bill seeks to add two statutory duties to decisions made under the Climate Change Act 2022 such that for any decisions which are likely to result in substantial greenhouse gas emissions, the impact on the health and wellbeing of Australian children would need to be taken into consideration.

## Statement of Support

The RACGP supports the proposal of the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023, which would create new statutory duties for significant decisions likely to result in substantial increase in greenhouse gas emissions.

It is the RACGP's view the objectives of the Bill are consistent with a *health in all policies* framework which applies a holistic lens through which general practice seeks to promote individual, community and population health and wellbeing. It is also a proposed objective of the Australian Government National Health and Climate Strategy.<sup>39</sup>

The remainder of our submission provides evidence about the health impacts of climate change on both the general population and children.

## The health impacts of climate change

Climate change is already having widespread impacts on human health – in Australia and globally.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) recognises climate change as the 'biggest health threat facing humanity'<sup>13</sup> with an estimated 250,000 additional deaths per year between 2030 and 2050, from issues such as malnutrition, diarrhoea, and heat stress.

Children are particularly vulnerable to these health issues. The human requirements for clean air, clean water and soil are all impacted by climate change and any delays to dealing with climate change will increase health risks which will

negatively impact our current and future young people. Climate change resulting from human activity is affecting our relationship with our environment and presents an urgent, significant and growing threat to health worldwide.<sup>3</sup>

The 2022 report of the Lancet Countdown on Climate Change and Health<sup>14</sup> declared that 'climate change's worsening impacts are increasingly affecting the foundations of human health and wellbeing, exacerbating the vulnerability of the world's populations to concurrent health threats.' The key findings of this leading global Commission, included that:

- Since 2021, extreme weather events such as more extreme bushfires and floods, have caused devastation across every continent.
- Vulnerable populations (adults older than 65 years, and children younger than one year of age), were exposed to more heatwave days in 2021 than annually in 1986-2005.
- Heat-related deaths increased by 68% between 2000 -04 and 2017-21.
- Climate change is affecting the spread of infectious diseases, increasing the risk of emerging diseases and epidemics for populations around the world.

It has further been projected that reduced food availability due to the effects of climate change will result in an additional 529,000 deaths worldwide, reversing much of the progress that would otherwise be made in reducing global undernutrition.<sup>15</sup> The pace of global heating and its associated health impacts continue to escalate.<sup>15</sup> In addition to driving climate change, air pollution from fossil fuels is estimated to account for one in five deaths globally<sup>15</sup>.

Likewise in Australia, climate change is already impacting population health.<sup>16</sup> Australia has already experienced an average of 1.47 °C of heating since the national records began in 1910.<sup>17</sup> Australia has seen an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events, including heatwaves, bushfires, droughts<sup>18</sup>, floods and storms<sup>19, 20</sup>. In a national study jointly conducted by Beyond Blue and the Climate Council, 80% of participants reported experiencing some form of extreme weather event since 2019. This included 63% having experienced heatwaves, 47% flooding, 42% bushfires, 36% drought, 29% destructive storms and 8% landslides. These events can have profound health impacts:<sup>21</sup>

- more frequent and widespread heatwaves and extreme heat increase the risks of heat stress, heat stroke, dehydration and mortality.<sup>5</sup> In the past ten years, there were 9,119 hospitalisations in Australia with direct evidence of extreme weather-related injury. In three of these ten years, hospitalisations for this type of injury exceeded 1,000 cases with extreme heat causing the largest proportion of injuries.<sup>10</sup> Heatwaves contribute to acute cerebrovascular accidents, and aggravate chronic respiratory, cardiac and kidney conditions and psychiatric illness. In addition to the 173 deaths that occurred during the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires, 374 excess deaths occurred during the heatwave that preceded this devastating event. The current carbon dioxide emissions trajectory is projected to increase heatwave-related deaths threefold in Melbourne and Brisbane and fivefold in Sydney over the period 2013 to 2080, compared with current heat-related mortality<sup>8</sup>.
- more frequent, severe and widespread bushfires, increasing risks of burns, smoke inhalation, heat stress, dehydration, trauma and long-term mental health impacts<sup>7</sup>. It is estimated that bushfire smoke associated with the Black Summer Bushfires was responsible for 417 excess deaths and 1124 hospitalisations for cardiovascular problems and 2027 for respiratory problems.<sup>22</sup>
- more extreme rainfall events, flooding, and storm surges, increasing risks of injury, communicable disease transmission, distress, and acute and chronic anxiety disorders<sup>8</sup>
- more frequent, prolonged, and widespread droughts, a significant cause of adverse mental health among rural Australians<sup>8</sup>.  
Extreme weather events often leave a long-term legacy of physical and mental health problems, socio-economic disadvantage, and insecure housing.<sup>23</sup>

Climate change is already contributing to a range of other health impacts, including changes in the distribution and transmission of vector-borne diseases. Widespread detections of Japanese encephalitis on the Australian mainland and as far south as central Victoria were an unprecedented development in 2021-22. Although this disease causes no symptoms in the majority of people infected, it can result in permanent disability and death, and had previously only been detected in the farthest reaches of northern Australia and among newly returned travellers.<sup>24</sup>

The 2023 report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change declared “there is a rapidly closing window of opportunity to secure a liveable and sustainable future for all.”<sup>25</sup> The United Nations Intergovernmental panel on Climate Change has determined that limiting global warming to 1.5 °C, compared with 2 °C, could reduce the number of people exposed to climate-related risks and susceptible to poverty by several hundred million by 2050.<sup>26</sup> The urgency of these calls was echoed by a unanimous statement from over 200 health and medical journals in 2021, which called for urgent action to reduce emissions to avert climate change causing catastrophic harm to health.<sup>27</sup> The World Health Organisation has advocated for an end to the proliferation of new fossil fuel developments, phase out existing use of fossil fuels and just support for individuals and communities particularly affected by this transition.<sup>28</sup> The RACGP has endorsed this call, alongside global family doctor and health professional organisations.

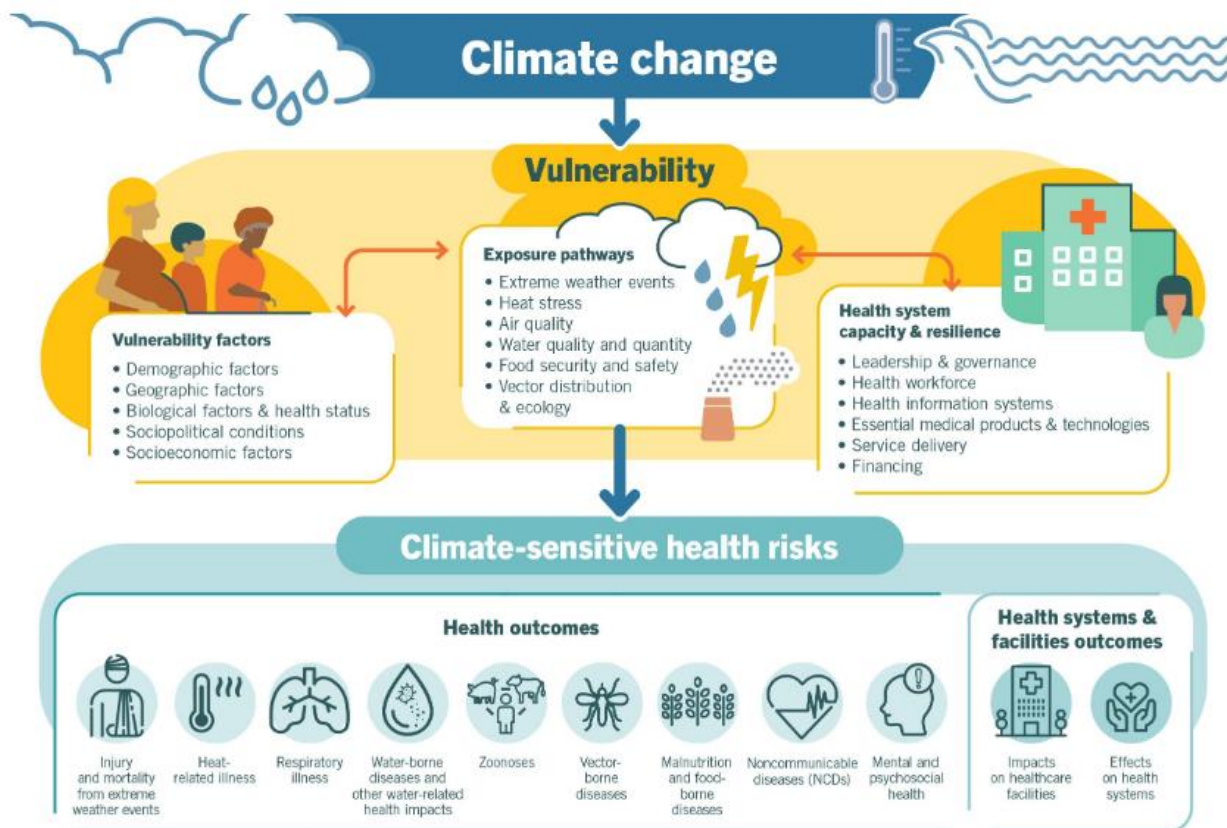


Figure: An overview of climate-sensitive health risks, their exposure pathways and vulnerability factors. Climate change impacts health both directly and indirectly, and is strongly mediated by environmental, social and public health determinants.

## The health impacts of climate change on children

Children are particularly vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change. The human requirements for clean air, clean water and soil are all impacted by climate change and any delays to dealing with climate change will increase health risks which will negatively impact our current and future young people.<sup>3</sup> Fundamentally, children today will live more of their lives experiencing more pronounced climate-health impacts. “Harmful exposures during childhood can irreversibly define physical and mental health and wellbeing, and children’s reliance on adults for their physical safety and emotional development limits their capacity to control their environment.”<sup>29</sup> There are many mechanisms through which climate change impacts child health.

- Extreme heat and air pollution have been associated with an increased risk of pregnancy complications including low birthweight, miscarriage, and pre-term birth.<sup>30, 31</sup>
- Children are particularly susceptible to extreme heat. Children can experience heatstroke, electrolyte imbalances, kidney-associated diseases and increased asthma exacerbations during high heat events and are more likely to attend emergency departments. Infants face especially high risks.<sup>31</sup>
- Climate change through temperature rise and an increase in flooding events has been associated with an increase incidence of diarrhoeal disease. Children are especially vulnerable to diarrhoeal diseases, which can cause serious illness and are responsible for more than half a million child deaths globally every year.<sup>32</sup> In 2016, it was estimated that gastroenteritis was responsible for \$359 million in direct health care costs in Australia every year, predominantly associated with hospitalisation and emergency department attendances, with children under five experiencing the highest incidence of disease.<sup>33</sup>
- Climate change has been associated with a range of factors which are potentially detrimental to child respiratory health, including altered distribution of air pollutants, increased formation of ground level ozone (a toxin to humans), and more intense and prolonged pollen seasons, along with increased fire danger. Accordingly, climate change puts children at risk of asthma exacerbations,<sup>31</sup> which affects 11% of all Australians and is responsible for the greatest burden of disease in Australia among children aged 1-14 years.<sup>34</sup> Climate change also has the potential to increase respiratory infections and affect long term development and function.<sup>35</sup>
- Climate change is having significant impacts on children and young people’s mental health. Children’s developmental vulnerability places them at risk of experiencing mental health problems following extreme weather events, as well as broader climate distress.<sup>36</sup> Adolescents and young adults who were directly exposed to the Black Summer bushfires were found to have higher rates of depression, anxiety, stress, and substance abuse, as well as lower psychological resilience.<sup>37</sup> In a recent national survey, one in four young adults reported experiencing eco-anxiety. Exo-anxiety or climate distress refers to anxiety and/or distress experience when constantly faced with problems associated with a changing climate.<sup>38</sup>

## Recommendations

General practice is the foundation of the Australian healthcare system. The RACGP recognises and embraces its responsibilities for the health of children, young people, and their families in that role. The prenatal, childhood and adolescent phases of development strongly influence an individual’s subsequent health, wellbeing, and opportunities in life. Therefore, the general practice care of children and young people takes on a special role in creating future opportunities, especially for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and other communities.

The RACGP believes that all Australian children should have equal access to health and opportunities for optimal childhood development and recognises there are opportunities for improving the health of Australian children through surveillance of early childhood development. As general practice is the only profession with regular contact through the very earliest development stages of the infant – from preconception, antenatal care, infancy, childhood, and adolescence – GPs have a crucial role to play in this.

The RACGP recognises that comprehensive healthcare for Australian children and young people is a fundamental health priority for Australia, with GPs playing a crucial role in promoting the health and wellbeing of this cohort<sup>2</sup>. There is increasing evidence from social, behavioural and neuroscience that highlights the importance of early childhood development for long term health outcomes. This evidence reinforces that the quality of a child's early environment is paramount in determining their life trajectory.

To safeguard the health of children in Australia, it is fundamental to adopt a preventative approach that addresses social and developmental determinants. The widespread and increasing health impacts of climate change on population health, and especially child health and wellbeing should be considered in all decisions which have the potential to substantially contribute to climate change. This approach is consistent with a *health in all policies* framework. A health in all policies framework aligns with the holistic lens through which general practice seeks to promote individual, community and population health and wellbeing. It is also a proposed objective of the Australian Government National Health and Climate Strategy.<sup>39</sup>

Accordingly, that RACGP supports the proposal of the Climate Change Amendment (Duty of Care and Intergenerational Climate Equity) Bill 2023, which would create new statutory duties for significant decisions likely to result in substantial increase in greenhouse gas emissions. These duties would require evaluation of the likely impact of the emissions on the health and wellbeing of current and future Australian children, and for their health and wellbeing to be considered as paramount. In the case of decisions involving the exploration or extraction of coal, oil or gas, decisions would be declined where the resulting greenhouse gas emissions are likely to pose a material risk of harm to the health and wellbeing of current and future Australian children.

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