

CMC CLIMATE CHANGE AND HEALTH POSITION STATEMENT 2024-2026

Purpose

The Council of Medical Colleges (CMC) as the peak body for Medical Colleges in Aotearoa New Zealand recognises that anthropogenic (man-made) climate change is a fundamental threat to human health.¹ The CMC recognises the health impact of climate change and refers to the body of evidence cited extensively by other medical colleges.² This statement lays out the CMC's broad advocacy position and outlines the steps that colleges can take to decarbonise.

Background

New Zealand is already experiencing the impact of warming associated with climate change with its warmest year on record in 2022.³ This warming will increase the severity and frequency of storms, flooding, heatwaves, drought and wildfire which will have direct impacts on affected communities.⁴

For example, Cyclone Gabrielle, one of the worst weather events in New Zealand's history, caused historic extreme rainfall and river flooding, significant wind damage and storm surges in many parts of the North Island in February 2023.⁵ Communities that bore the brunt of the cyclone (e.g. in Hawke's Bay and Te Tairāwhiti) suffered widespread damage, loss of life, displacement of families, with rural communities cut off for weeks from vital services. Such extreme events are expected to intensify as sea levels continue to gradually rise, oceans warm, and weather patterns change.

In short, climate change will have wide ranging implications for physical and mental health through the immediate effects of changes in climate and weather, through impacts on ecosystems that support human life (e.g. through food production) and through indirect pathways such as social disruption.⁶ These will disproportionately effect priority population groups which will impede work to achieve health equity.⁷

CMC acknowledges the significance of kaitiakitanga (stewardship) in relation to our climate response. Kaitiakitanga is a principle which describes the protection and preservation of ancestral lands and waters for the benefit of subsequent generations.^{8,9}

Te takahi i te tapu o Papatūānuku

Te takahi i te tapu o te Tangata (If the sacredness of our Earth Mother is trampled, then the sacredness of people is also adversely affected).¹⁰

This whakataukī is underpinned by the traditional Māori cosmological worldview that Māori cannot be separated from nature; but are, instead, direct descendants of Papatūānuku (Mother Earth) interacting to harmoniously exist as inextricable parts of the fabric of life.¹¹

Position

The CMC calls for urgent action on the climate emergency by government, organisations (including colleges) and the public to urgently undertake measures to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change that will bring substantial co-benefits to health outcomes and increased health equity for the population.

It recognises the importance of its own role in leadership and advocacy at the intersection of health and climate change and the role that Medical Colleges and individual clinicians can play to reduce their carbon footprint.

The CMC supports and advocates for the following goals to reduce emissions, mitigate the impact of climate change, and improve health equity:

- reduce demand for healthcare through public health measures
- match the supply of health services to demand (thus ensuring appropriate care and avoiding unnecessary investigations and treatment)
- reduce emissions from the supply of health services¹²
- improve the resilience of the health system in the face of extreme weather events, and
- for colleges to decarbonise their operations.

College Actions

The CMC encourages colleges to take action on decarbonising their own operations and reduce emissions from the delivery of health services through 2024-26 by:

- Reducing staff and members air travel (if carbon offsets are available then these should be purchased)
- Offering hybrid online attendance when hosting meetings or a conference
- Examining ways to give CPD (Continuing Professional Development) recognition to learning about, implementing and evaluating decarbonised healthcare
- Collaborate when opportunities arise to support and advocate for the reduction of emissions in the health system and improve its resilience
- Establish sustainability committees within their own disciplines to further decarbonise including but not limited to investigating:
 - Climate-friendly health care delivery (e.g. Choosing Wisely)
 - Ways to minimise and decarbonise patient travel (e.g. stacking together out-of-region patient appointments, use of telehealth)
 - Prescribing climate friendly medicines and devices, and
 - Climate-friendly waste management (e.g. reducing single-use plastics).

References

1 World Health Organisation (2013). Fact Sheet: Climate Change and Health, 12 October 2013. Available from: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

2 See statements by [ACEM](#), [ANZCA](#), [RNZCGP](#), [NZCPHM](#), [RCMA](#), [RACP](#), [RANZCP](#).

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4 Ministry for the Environment (2022). Aotearoa New Zealand's First National Adaptation Plan. Wellington (NZ): Ministry for the Environment; 2022. Available from: <https://environment.govt.nz/assets/publications/climate-change/MFE-AoG-20664-GF-National-Adaptation-Plan-2022-WEB.pdf>

5 NIWA (2023). In numbers: New Zealand's wild summer weather; 3 March 2023. Wellington (NZ): NIWA. Available from: <https://niwa.co.nz/news/in-numbers-new-zealands-wild-summer-weather>

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