

Policy statement

December 2020

Climate change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health

Climate change and its impacts pose an increasing threat to the continued health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association (AIDA) therefore:

- Declares that climate change policy inaction is a threat to human life
- Calls for immediate bipartisan Federal policy instruments which provide a clear and efficient pathway for Australia to reach net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. This target is supported by most Australians and has been set as a target or draft target by all States and territories and adopted by 73 countries worldwide.^{1,2,3} It is further supported by the federal opposition⁴
- Supports its Australian health partners, including the Australian Medical Association (AMA), National Rural Health Alliance, and Climate and Health Alliance in advocating for effective climate policy to mitigate against climate change, and to prevent adverse health effects. AIDA stresses that mitigation must be prioritised over adaptation
- Stands with the Australian Medical Association (AMA), the Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP), the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) and Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) in calling for a national plan for climate change and health, in accord with the 51 other countries globally to have implemented such a plan.⁵ AIDA supports the use of the *CAHA Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-being for Australia* as a basis for the national strategy
- Advocates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak health organisations fully participate in national planning for climate change and health, to collaboratively develop policy which adequately addresses the increasing adverse health effects of climate change.^{6,7} Further, AIDA supports the CAHA Framework in that policies need to incorporate and promote agency of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people⁸
- Calls on the Federal government to provide adequate and ongoing funding to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of and knowledge about Country are being integrated into land management strategies, including around fire management⁹
- Calls for the social determinants of health (such as adequate housing infrastructure and water supplies) and cultural determinants of health (such as connection to and health of Country and language) to be prioritised and recognised as underlying enablers of health
- Advocates that housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, especially in northern communities incorporates planning for extreme weather conditions, including heat
- Calls on the Federal government to expedite adaptation planning for sea-level rise in low-lying coastal areas, particularly Arnhem Land, Kakadu, and the Torres Strait Islands to protect the health and wellbeing of affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

Introduction

As the peak body for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students, AIDA's goal is to grow the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and develop a culturally safe health care system for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander patients. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical practitioners play an important role in improving health outcomes by embedding cultural safety in health care for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and aligning clinical and unique socio-cultural skills.^{10 11}

Climate change policy and environmental events have a substantial impact on human health, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' health outcomes. AIDA values social justice, Indigenous and human rights, and believes that the current climate change policy inaction encroaches on our values and goals and endangers the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.¹²

To ensure optimal health outcomes in a changing climate, AIDA declares that climate change is a health emergency which threatens the survival of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities, and cultures, as well as the broader population. AIDA aligns with other Australian health professional organisations (including the AMA, RACP, RACGP, Australian Medical Students' Association (AMSA) and CAHA), and Torres Strait and Cape York doctors to promote urgent multi-sectoral federal government policy action to immediately effect emissions reductions.¹³ This is essential to minimise health impacts on all Australians, but particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in northern regional and remote Australian regions. AIDA supports the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007 which makes clear that 'Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health.'¹⁴

Increasing impacts on health from climate change-related extreme events have mobilised the health sector to advocate for health to be integrated in climate mitigation and adaptation policy.¹⁵ By 2020, the AMA and eight Australian medical colleges had joined governments in 28 countries including the United Kingdom, New Zealand, Canada and the European Union in declaring climate change a health emergency.^{16 17 18} AIDA is deeply concerned given the increasing health impacts on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, the unprecedented destruction of vegetation and wildlife and the impacts on human health during the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfire season, as well as a statement by Australia's Chief Scientific Officer that Australia's current trajectory for warming will be close to 4°C by 2100.¹⁹ The health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be urgently protected by incorporating a national health policy into climate change policy, to manage health risks and plan for current impending health impacts. In this context AIDA reiterates the Aboriginal definition of health, where health 'means not just the physical wellbeing of an individual but refers to the social, emotional and cultural wellbeing of the whole Community in which each individual is able to achieve their full potential as a human being, thereby bringing about the total wellbeing of their Community.'²⁰

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people disproportionately experience the adverse effects of climate change. Climate policy impacts their physical health outcomes, and that impact is exacerbated in regional and remote communities.²¹ In addition, climate-induced damage to land and sea threatens connections to Country and impacts spiritual and mental health.²²

AIDA advocates for a national climate change policy which benefits all Australians, through a public health approach. In doing so, AIDA joins with other Australian health professional organisations in response to the World Health Organisation *Special Report on Climate Change and Health* to mobilise for climate policy which protects Australian lives.²³ Accordingly, AIDA acknowledges that benefits of effective mitigation against climate change are not limited to short-term economics but include significant co-benefits to health for this generation, but importantly, for our children's future.²⁴

Climate change in Australia

With an average global warming of 1.1°C since pre-industrial times, the effects of climate change are now experienced universally and pose a monumental threat to human health.²⁵ Australia is particularly exposed to the effects of extreme heat, drought, sea level rise and coastal inundation given its reliance on broad-acre agriculture and large coastal populations. As such, the adverse effects of climate change on health are expected to increase yet they will be experienced disproportionately and pre-existing health inequalities will be exacerbated.^{26 27 28} Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote and northern communities, particularly children, women and the elderly, are experiencing and will continue to experience health impacts most severely.^{29 30} Further, impacts on Country are intricately connected to spiritual and mental health.³¹

Caring for Country

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have cared for Country for more than 65,000 years³² and know that, 'if you look after the Country, the Country will look after you.'³³ Optimal health is holistic and characterised by the integration of the personal, social, and ecological for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.³⁴ Connection with Country is a significant cultural determinant of health, and strongly contributes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's identity, impacting mental, spiritual, and physical health.³⁵

The extreme weather events associated with climate change being seen on Country are amplifying risk factors for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's health.³⁶ When Country is sick from the environmental ill-effects of climate change, the sacred relationship with plants, animals and spirit ancestors is ruptured. When ancestral homelands are submerged, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disconnected from the spirits of the land.³⁷ Because of the strength of interconnectedness to Country, the climate disease will magnify adverse effects upon Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's social and emotional wellbeing.³⁸

Health as a human right

The federal government has obligations to mitigate against climate change under international human rights law. As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), Australia is obliged to 'take appropriate steps to ensure for all people the right to an adequate standard of living'³⁹ (see Article 11). The right to health is further codified as a human right in Article 24 of the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007.⁴⁰ Under this Declaration, '... states shall take effective measures to ensure continuing improvement of health for Indigenous people.'⁴¹ Australia's commitments under the Paris Agreement further ratify the right to health and recognise the rights of vulnerable groups, whereby nations must take measures to address climate change to protect the rights of those most vulnerable.⁴²

Federal government policy

The new *National Agreement on Closing the Gap* commits to raise the life expectancy of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to parity with non-Indigenous populations by 2031.⁴³ Further obligations exist under the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, in order to meet goals around climate action (SDG 13), clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), and good health and well-being (SDG 3), incorporating neo-natal mortality, suicide and mortality attributed to household and ambient air pollution.⁴⁴ The call for specific support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities is not new and was identified in 2008 by the Australian Human Rights Commission in the *Native Title Report*.⁴⁵ Environment also features in the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2013-2023*, noting that 'trachoma is associated with living in an arid environment (including the impact of dust)'.⁴⁶ Accordingly, enacting effective climate change mitigation is imperative to avoid exacerbating existing health inequities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁴⁷

Climate change and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities

The effects of climate change are manifold and are directly and indirectly affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Direct impacts include increased heatwaves, drought, floods and storms and bushfires, which indirectly impact water and air quality and changes to ecological systems.⁴⁸ Higher average and extreme temperatures, altered rainfall patterns, sea level rise and extreme weather are resulting in increased heatwaves, flood, drought and fire.⁴⁹ Human health is affected by resultant increases in ozone levels, particulate pollution and pollen allergenicity burden, water-borne diseases, under-nutrition and heat stroke which exacerbate cardiovascular and respiratory disease and impact mental health.⁵⁰ Such health impacts are strongly mediated by social, cultural, public health and environmental determinants.⁵¹

Climate change is now widely experienced across Australia, with four out of five Australians reporting being affected.⁵² Health mitigation involves pre-emptive measures which, in reducing greenhouse gas emissions, serve to prevent the adverse health impacts of climate change, while adaptive measures seek to address the effects of climate change on health.⁵³ ⁵⁴ Conversely, a focus on adaptation measures as a response to climate change is likely to increase health inequities for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁵⁵

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities, the threats from climate change are amplified.⁵⁶ Livelihoods are sustained by natural ecosystems, while communities are highly exposed to climate hazards.⁵⁷ Extreme weather events may directly and indirectly reduce life expectancy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, increase child mortality rates and negatively impact social and emotional wellbeing. A strong relationship with Country is further impacted by limited access to health care and limited quality of health care in remote communities, a greater pre-existing disease burden (higher rates of chronic renal disease and cardiovascular disease) and lower socioeconomic status.⁵⁸ These factors impede the physiological and social adaptations to the health stressors of climate change.⁵⁹

The disproportionate experiences of climatic extremes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in rural and remote areas will, however, be exacerbated by social determinants of health including higher levels of rental accommodation and overcrowding.⁶⁰ ⁶¹ ⁶² Additional stressors to health caused by climatic effects compound underlying health stressors such as under-nutrition and malnutrition.

Extreme heat

Extreme heat is responsible for more deaths in Australia than a combination of all other natural hazards.⁶³ For communities in northern Australia, the climatic extremes associated with climate change will be more pronounced, with hotter day and night-time temperatures posing greater risk of illness and death from heat.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ High temperatures and increases in intensity, frequency and duration of heatwaves are anticipated to be a major problem.⁶⁶ ⁶⁷ In Alice Springs in 2018, some unshaded streets experienced temperatures of between 61°C and 68°C.⁶⁸ Extremes of heat pose greater risk of illness and death for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with pre-existing health conditions. Heat stress and heat stroke magnify co-morbidities of heart failure and renal disease.⁶⁹ ⁷⁰

In addition, these effects will be more pronounced for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, the poor (particularly women), the elderly and people working outdoors.⁷¹ Forced migration as an adaptation strategy from areas of extreme temperatures such as experienced in Central Australia or low-lying areas in the Torres Strait Islands and far north Queensland would cause enormous mental and spiritual distress, as ties to sources of Aboriginal identity are severed.⁷² Such loss of cultural integrity impinges on the cultural rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples 2007, may weaken community structures.⁷³

Food security

Bush food sources have sustained Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for tens of thousands of years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander coastal communities are still sustained by sea resources as part of a traditional diet.⁷⁴ For coastal communities on the Cape York Peninsula, however, increased coral bleaching of the Great Barrier Reef is causing significant declines in fish species variation, in abundance and diversity.⁷⁵ ⁷⁶ Moreover, communities in the Torres Strait Islands and north-western Australia are affected by sea grass habitat loss for Dugong populations and population decline.^{77 78}

Australian contemporary agriculture is particularly exposed to the effects of drought, flooding, and soil erosion. Falls in farm production are associated with increases in prices. During the drought between 2005 and 2007, prices increased at double the rate of the Consumer Price Index, with fruit and vegetables increasing at 43 per cent and 33 per cent, respectively.⁷⁹ Increases in food prices increases pressure in obtaining adequate nutrition for health for people on low incomes ⁸⁰ and food pricing and food security in remote Indigenous communities are currently the subject of a federal inquiry. ⁸¹

Housing and heat impacts

Access to humane housing is a social determinant of health. Safe, clean, and affordable housing influences how people interact with their health and their provider of health care. Notably, 'between one third and one half of the life expectancy gap may be explained by differences in the social determinants of health.'⁸²

Rural and remote housing is often older and less thermally efficient than metropolitan housing.⁸³ Remote communities often experience inadequate housing, particularly on homelands. AIDA advocates that key consideration be awarded to providing safe and secure, appropriate, and health-conscious housing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to mitigate the dangers of global warming and its harmful effect on health and wellbeing.

Sea level rise

Eighty-five per cent of Australia's regional and rural communities live within 50 kilometres of the coast, with approximately 329 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities living within 10 kilometres of coastline.⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ Most of these coastal communities are in remote areas. These remote communities in northern areas of Australia and low-lying Torres Strait Islands are particularly exposed to sea-level rise.⁸⁶

The Bininj and Munggyuy people in Kakadu and the Yolngu in Arnhem land are witnessing flash flooding of flood plains and saltwater inundation.⁸⁷ World heritage-listed Kakadu landscapes will experience dramatic changes with most flood plains inundated by 2100, affecting the entire freshwater ecosystem.⁸⁸ Animal populations such as water birds who depend on fresh water, will be among the many species threatened.⁸⁹ Extreme sea level events in the Kimberley region are predicted to increase by up to one thousand times and for the Pilbara region, up to one hundred times.⁹⁰ Similarly, in the Torres Strait Islands, coral cay islands have experienced increased erosion, while some low-lying islands and northern Australian coastal communities also experience storm surges.⁹¹

Livelihoods and quality of life of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities will be impacted by these changes because, 'when erosion happens, and the lands get taken away by the seas, it's like a piece of us that gets taken with it – a piece of our heart, a piece of our body. That's why it has an effect on us. Not only the islands but us, as people.'⁹² As a result, the connection to Country is severed, in turn affecting the emotional and social wellbeing of families, communities and individuals.

Water

Poor water quality can increase instances of noroviruses and rotaviruses causing gastroenteritis, diarrhoea, and hepatitis.⁹³ Globally diarrhoeal diseases are responsible for one in ten deaths of children under 5 years of age.⁹⁴ In Central Australia, more than nine remote communities and outstations are experiencing water shortages.⁹⁵ More have reported poor water quality resulting from low water levels in aquifers. Forty Aboriginal Nations cross the Murray-Darling basin, which provides the water for close to half of Australia's agricultural production.^{96 97} Continued decreases in rainfall in this southern Australian area, along with reduced snowfall in the Australian Alps will dramatically impact the Murray and Murrumbidgee catchments.⁹⁸ The decline in health of river ecosystems from water allocations, algal blooms, increased drought and evaporation impacts the food and medicine sources, the spiritual and cultural connections maintained for thousands of years through caring for Country.^{99 100} Without significant action on climate change, a 92 to 97 per cent decline in irrigated agriculture capacity is anticipated, causing substantial pressure on cultural practices and food security.¹⁰¹

Land management practices

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voices and knowledges have historically been undervalued by dominant non-Indigenous worldviews, knowledges, and values.¹⁰² Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have unique knowledge of the local environment and ways of protecting it through cultural practices.¹⁰³ At the International Indigenous Peoples' Forum on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the need for recognition of knowledges of sustainable practices to mitigate and adapt to climate change on a global level was reinforced:¹⁰⁴

*Indigenous people must be part of the solution to climate change. This is because you have the traditional knowledge of your ancestors. The important value of that knowledge simply cannot—and must not—be understated. You are also essential in finding solutions today and in the future. The Paris Climate Change Agreement recognizes this. It recognizes your role in building a world that is resilient in the face of climate impacts.*¹⁰⁵

The value of traditional land management extends past the land itself. In Australia, cultural fire regimes based on Indigenous knowledges of country and fire using low and slow-moving fire to burn the right ecosystems at the right time has been found to rejuvenate ecosystems, remove invasive species and reduce the effect of wildfire burns.^{106 107} There is growing evidence that traditional land management for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people creates co-benefits of health, confidence, and capacity-building.¹⁰⁸ However, program life is limited by short funding cycles, and reliant on competitive land management grants.¹⁰⁹ Funding over longer timeframes would assist in preventing the loss of momentum in Indigenous cultural management of land and assist in maintaining the co-benefits of health.^{110 111} Promoting traditional land management is intricately linked to health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as 'like Songlines, fire unified Australia'¹¹² thereby reflecting the relationship of health culture and wellbeing. Cultural practices such as fire burning, and sustainable land management are threatened by climate change and the lack of policy protecting these important Indigenous cultural practices.

Conclusion

The future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and the health of future generations is at stake. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' connections to lands are threatened. The protection of the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who are the traditional custodians of our ancestral lands, must be addressed. AIDA's Indigenous doctors and medical students urgently demand the mitigation of climate change risks to minimise further threat to the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and all Australians.

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