



5 May 2017

Climate Change Policies Review – Discussion Paper submissions
2017 Review Branch
Department of the Environment and Energy
GPO Box 787
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Via email: climatechangereview@environment.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam

Review of climate change policies

The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) welcomes the opportunity to make submission to the Australian Government Review of climate change policies: Discussion paper March 2017.

Established in 1924, the ANMF is the largest professional and industrial organisation in Australia for nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing, with Branches in each State and Territory of Australia. Our core business is the professional and industrial representation of ANMF members and the professions of nursing and midwifery.

Our membership of over 259,000 nurses, midwives and assistants in nursing, is employed in a wide range of settings in urban, rural and remote locations in both the public and private health, maternal and aged care sectors.

As the largest professional organisation for nurses and midwives in Australia, the ANMF has, on behalf of our members, a genuine interest in, and concern for, matters relating to the public health of this nation. Health care is the core business of the nursing and midwifery professions and climate change is undeniably a public health issue¹.

The link between health professionals and climate change is captured in the 2015 Lancet Commission on *Health and Climate Change: Policy Responses to Protect Public Health*². The report reminds us of the role of health professionals in communicating the risk of climate change to human health. However, the report also emphasises that tackling climate change could be the greatest global opportunity to improve health outcomes, of the 21st century.

We call on the Australian Government to demonstrate its commitment to addressing the challenge of climate change and reduce emissions by responding to and integrating public health considerations when developing climate change policies.

¹ World Health Organisation. The Health and Environment Linkages Initiative (HELI). Climate change and health references/resource links. WHO website: <http://www.who.int/heli/risks/climate/climatedirectory/en/index1.html>

² The Lancet Commission. *Health and climate change: policy responses to protect public health*. Published online June 23, 2015. [http://thelancet.com/journals/lanet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(15\)60854-6/fulltext](http://thelancet.com/journals/lanet/article/PIIS0140-6736(15)60854-6/fulltext)

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*The industrial and
professional organisation
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Assistants in Nursing
in Australia*

As the foremost front-line health care professionals, nurses and midwives witness first hand the health consequences of changes in our natural environment. We see the impact of climate, and changing climate patterns, on the health of individuals and communities for whom we provide care. We see the direct effects from storms, drought, floods, bushfires, and heatwaves and the consequent human suffering.

There can also be indirect effects from these events when individuals are unable to manage their pre existing co-morbidities. This is due to reduced or no access to supplies (medicines), medical assistance, and loss of services and agriculture in affected areas.

Nurses and midwives experience the indirect impact on the persons for who we provide care caused by altered water quality, air pollution, changes to land use and ecological change; and, anguish over the senseless outcomes of these, such as mental illness, cardiovascular and respiratory diseases, infectious disease epidemics, injuries and poisoning, and the loss of homes, livestock, land and livelihood.

The message from nurses and midwives on their lived experience of health effects from climate change is put succinctly by a colleague from the United States when she says: "...We're talking about the health impact of what we're seeing with our patients. It's about real people."³

The ANMF has particular concern for the impact of climate change on people living in poverty and other vulnerable groups, such as people in rural and remote areas, and especially isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

Adverse health effects on individuals and communities will obviously also impact health systems and health care delivery, with the treatment of climate change-related health conditions adding to the burden of an already stretched Australian healthcare workforce. Nurses and midwives, as the largest cohort within this workforce, will take the brunt of this impact.

The devastation reported in the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission, with 173 deaths and 430,000 hectares of land burnt, is a stark example of how a natural disaster event has impacted the physical and mental health and well-being of both the community and the nursing and midwifery workforce.

Response to the disaster relied largely on the nursing and midwifery workforce, to respond to the health needs of the community.

Some of the nursing and midwifery workforce response to the 2009 Victorian bushfires included:

- Emergency Departments provided care to more than 800 injured people;
- More than 130 people required hospital admission;
- Extra specialty care was provided with 296 nursing hours allocated over a 6 week period to the Victorian Alfred adult burns unit;
- Over 10,000 vouchers through the Victorian Bushfire Appeal Fund provided counselling for over 2400 people; and

³ Domrose, C. The climate connection: Nurses examine effects of climate change on public health. Posted on Nurse.com on October 12, 2015. Retrieved from: <https://www.nurse.com/blog/2015/10/12/44479/>

- Over 110 people received specific grief or bereavement counselling through 12 bereavement support groups.⁴

In November 2016 the Australian Government ratified the Paris Agreement. Within the preamble to that Agreement was a call to signing-on countries that “when taking action to address climate change, [they must] respect, promote and consider their respective obligations on ... the right to health ...”.

We note, with regret, reports in December 2016 that Australia may not be on track to meet our Paris commitments.⁵

As outlined in the preceding paragraphs, the ANMF is an organisation whose members are integral to the health of this country. Improving the health of our community is the everyday business of our members. We therefore find it astonishing, and quite frankly negligent in the extreme, that the Australian Government climate change policy makes no mention of ‘health’. And, throughout the commentary in the Discussion paper (2017) the word ‘health’ rates ONE mention, and that, not until page 25. Given the plethora of documented evidence on health effects of climate change, and our members’ lived experiences, we find this inexcusable.

The absence of health as a central theme when considering and responding to climate change risks, is an oversight that threatens the future health and well-being of the community. Policies that underpin the measures to meet our Paris climate change commitments, must emphasise required actions to reduce harmful carbon emissions and must be driven by principles for preserving and improving the community’s health. These principles must be embedded in policy.

We congratulate the South Australian and Victorian state governments for exploring opportunities for renewable clean energy solutions. Moving away from fossil fuels, in particular coal as an energy source that is harmful to human health is an essential solution. It will benefit both the community and environment, keeping Australia on track to meet the Paris commitments to reduce emissions and act on global warming.

A national strategy

As a founding member of the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA)⁶, the ANMF contributed to the development of the CAHA document: *Towards a National Strategy on Climate Health and Well-being for Australia*. We urge the Australian government to take seriously the fact that climate change is having deleterious effects on the health of the very people the Government is charged to protect.

It is imperative the health risks of climate change and benefits to health of climate mitigation and adaptation actions, are the focus of the government’s climate change policies. Further, we join with other CAHA members in arguing that this nation must have a comprehensive national strategy which places health as a central issue in all climate policies.

⁴ Department of Premier and Cabinet. 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission final report. <http://dpc.vic.gov.au/index.php/component/content/article/22-html/867-2009-victorian-bushfires-royal-commission>

⁵ <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2016-12-09/australias-energy-policy-cant-meet-current-targets/8105386>

⁶ Climate and Health Alliance. CAHA website. National Strategy for Climate, Health and Wellbeing: <http://www.caha.org.au/national-strategy-climate-health-wellbeing>

The following are issues which should be included in the Government's climate change policies, within a national strategy:

Just transition

The ANMF considers people and their health must have prime consideration in climate change policy. Policies should focus not just on economic benefits, but most especially on community sustainability, resilience and health – that is, the needs of people and families. This includes attention to strategies for 'just transition' to protect workers, families and communities in moving from dirty to clean energy sources. We, of course, acknowledge there is some urgency in transitioning from coal to renewable energy sources, due to adverse effects on the environment, public health and the economy from climate change. We want governments to take action to reduce and limit the release of carbon dioxide emissions from fossil fuels into the atmosphere.

However, this must be done through a planned process including genuine consultation with all parties concerned, especially the employees. It is critical the emissions reduction process is carefully planned, to protect the health and welfare of the workers involved, their families, and their communities. Health status and economic viability are key factors. Unemployment not only means loss of income it can have gravely adverse effects on the physical and mental health of the person concerned and also on their family who depend on that income and the community in which they live (which may well exist because of coal mining activity). For these reasons the ANMF urges the Government to include 'just transition' away from fossil fuel reliance within its climate change policies.

A low carbon economy provides an opportunity to develop clean energy jobs. Modelling conducted by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research reported that with the right climate and energy policies, one million new jobs can be created while reducing Australia's climate pollution by 80 per cent from 2005 levels by 2040.⁷

Transparent planning

The ANMF wants the Government to develop climate change adaptation plans for climate change management, and that these be developed in conjunction with the community and accessible by the community. These plans must centre on the impacts of climate change on people and their health. While the current Discussion paper (2017) is technically open to the public, the relatively short timeframe for consultation means that few within the community will actually know about, and participate in, the process.

The ANMF considers a national strategy will provide the transparency of actions called for in the Paris Agreement, to which Australia is a party, as well as facilitating tracking and reporting on progress, as required under the Agreement.

Health sector imperatives and opportunities

Preparation of the health sector

The ANMF advocates for a sustainable workforce and environmentally sustainable workplaces to deal with existing and future health effects of climate change. This means commitment to, and investment in, improvements to working conditions within the health and aged care sectors which already are, and will increasingly, feel the effects of health care issues resulting from

⁷ Australian Conservation Foundation. *Jobs in a clean energy future*. <https://www.acf.org.au/jobs>

climate change. Measures for investing in sustainable healthcare and preparing the health sector to deal with existing and future health effects of climate change include:

- appropriate skills mix designed to meet acute and chronic health and aged care needs,
- adequate numbers of qualified nurses and midwives – that means instituting effective evidence-based workload monitoring systems, and
- ensuring disaster management plans are in place for natural disasters and epidemics.

Nurses and midwives in so many health facilities around the country are leading the way in introducing environmentally sustainable systems into their workplace practices. These initiatives should be acknowledged, applauded, replicated, appropriately funded, and included in climate change policies, throughout all health and aged care facilities and care delivery settings.

Health sector– waste management

We note the discussion paper also omits any reference to the health sector in the context of managing waste generation and emissions reductions. This is an oversight when considering the investment in the health sector represents over 10% of GDP in 2014-2015.⁸ Hospitals typically use two-and-a-half times more energy than commercial buildings.⁹

Health Care Without Harm

Auditing health sector waste and emissions generated from health care delivery and acting to reduce the adverse health impacts of care delivery is critical and must be captured in climate policies to address the paradox; that health care delivery is causing harm.

We provide the following Victorian example to demonstrate the opportunities the health sector has in mitigating waste and emissions:

Reducing clinical waste and producing cost savings:

Health services are significant producers of waste, both hazardous and non-hazardous waste. In 2010/11 it was estimated Victorian public healthcare services generated 42,000 tonnes of solid waste per year. The cost of disposing of this waste was close to \$17 million, two-thirds of which was attributed to the treatment and disposal of clinical waste.¹⁰ Disposing of clinical waste is many times more expensive than general waste, yet studies have found up to 90% of that waste gets classified incorrectly.¹¹

Health service clinical waste is reported at between 15-22% of all waste¹², reducing incorrect streaming of waste into clinical waste would present a major environmental and cost saving particularly as clinical waste has to be chemically treated or incinerated for safe disposal¹³.

⁸ Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Health expenditure Australia 2014-2015.

<http://www.aihw.gov.au/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=60129557188>

⁹ NSW Nurses and Midwives Association. <http://www.nswnma.asn.au/hospital-takes-no-bull-approach-to-healthcare/>

¹⁰ Health Vic Sustainability <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/hospitals-and-health-services/planning-infrastructure/sustainability/waste>

¹¹ Hospital and Healthcare Bulletin Sustainable perioperative practices – Reducing, reusing or recycling <http://www.hospitalhealth.com.au/news/hospital-departments/sustainable-perioperative-practices-reducing-reusing-recycling/>

¹² As reported in a selection of health services Environmental Sustainability Reports

¹³ EPA Victoria Industrial Waste Resource Guidelines Clinical and Related Waste – Operational Guidance <http://www.epa.vic.gov.au/~media/Publications/IWRG612%201.pdf> accessed 07/06/2016

PVC and comingled/other waste recycling

Polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is one of the most used plastics in the world. Intravenous (IV) bags, face masks and oxygen tubing are all items commonly used in hospitals. Over 50 million IV bags are used annually in Australia, yet recycling and diverting from landfill is not a feature of hospital waste management throughout the country, when it could easily be so. A 300 bed hospital could recycle 2.5 tonnes of PVC each year, yet only a select number of hospitals take the opportunity to recycle: <http://www.vinyl.org.au/pvc-in-healthcare-2/pvc-recycling-in-hospitals>

Where PVC is recycled, the cost of waste management for that product becomes negligible. However, when placed in landfill or burnt, both the financial and environmental costs increase. Victorian health services have access to an effective and efficient PVC recycling program. When used it decreases disposal costs, reduces dangerous pollution and reduces the use of raw materials in PVC products.

General waste too is disposed of at cost and contributes to pollution and carbon emissions. Health research estimates that 75-90% of healthcare waste is potentially recyclable or comparable to general household waste. Given the potential cost benefits associated with the efficient reduction of both clinical and general waste it makes sense for health services to focus efforts on waste reduction and recycling strategies that address environmental issues and reduce costs.¹⁴

Policies must be developed to address and resolve the issue of health care delivery causing harm to the community. The Australian community expects it.

International responsibilities

The ANMF is pleased to see inclusion in the Government's climate change policies a section on "Australia's international climate policies". We are concerned for our Pacific Islander neighbours and nursing and midwifery colleagues there, from whom we have heard first hand how they are already suffering significant effects of climate change, very much disproportionately to their contribution to it's causes.

Without the approach of a national strategy to identify and drive activities to mitigate adverse effects of climate change, it is difficult to envisage how Australia will be able to implement effective policies, or fulfil its international obligations under the Paris Agreement.

Should you require further information on this matter, please contact Julianne Bryce, Senior Federal Professional Officer, ANMF Federal Office, Melbourne on 03 96028500 or julianne@anmf.org.au.

Yours sincerely



Lee Thomas
Federal Secretary

Additional reference for consideration by the Committee:

Australian Nursing & Midwifery Federation. ANMF Policy: *Climate change*. May 2015.
Available at: <http://www.anmf.org.au>

¹⁴ Hospital and Healthcare Bulletin Sustainable perioperative practices – Reducing, reusing or recycling
<http://www.hospitalhealth.com.au/news/hospital-departments/sustainable-perioperative-practices-reducing-reusing-recycling/>