



DOCTORS
REFORM
SOCIETY

The Doctors Reform Society of Australia
PO Box 591
Ermington NSW 1700
ph (02) 9613 8305
fax (02) 9613 8305
drs@drs.org.au

Submission to the 2017 Review of Australia's climate change policies

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What about health impacts?

The Doctors Reform Society is a health organisation which aims to improve health for all people in a socially just and equitable way. We believe that human health depends fundamentally on a healthy environment. We accept the scientific consensus that anthropogenic global warming is occurring, that this is a great hazard to health, and that urgent action to combat this is required.¹

It is from our health perspective that we wish to make a brief submission to the current review of Australia's climate change policies. This complements and in places overlaps with our recent submission to the National Electricity Market review.²

We welcome the discussion paper's acknowledgement that the climate change is a global issue requiring an international response, in which Australia has an important role to play.³

However, we note the near-absence of discussion of health in the discussion paper – indeed, the word “health” appears only once, in reference to motor vehicle emissions rather than climate change impacts. It is vital that the Australian government responds to climate change not just as an environmental issue or an energy issue but also as a serious health issue.

Health and climate change

The current and potential future health implications of climate change are profound.^{4,5} Health impacts of climate change include both direct effects (heatwaves, storms, flooding, drought) and indirect effects (such as malnutrition due to food insecurity, displacement of populations due to rising sea levels, changing patterns of infectious diseases, mental illness, pollution-induced physical illness, and conflict).⁵ Health effects of climate change are expected to be greatest amongst socioeconomically deprived communities. A recent report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change found confidently that without substantial mitigation efforts, there is a “high to very high risk of severe, widespread and irreversible impacts globally” of climate change.⁶ Policies to mitigate climate change therefore need to be given great priority worldwide, including in Australia.

The discussion paper cheerfully reports that Australia is well on track to meeting its emission reduction target for 2020, and has “made significant progress” towards its 2030 goals. Despite this apparent good news, several facts make us concerned for the future of Australia's emissions. First, many Australian climate experts believe that Australia's 2030 goals are an insufficient contribution towards the Paris agreement's global goal of constraining global warming to 1.5 - 2 degrees centigrade.⁷ Second, on current trends, experts believe Australia's progress is insufficient to meet even these insufficient targets.^{8,9} We understand that much of the improvement towards the 2020 goals was driven by a reduction in land clearing,⁸ further progress on which has recently been threatened by a failure to legislate greater restrictions on land clearing in Queensland.¹⁰ We need much greater ambition and action across many sectors of Australian society to make better progress towards a safe future climate.

Essentially, we believe that emissions reduction should be as quickly as possible. We note that Australia's Climate Change Authority recommended "a 2025 target of 30 per cent below 2000 levels [and] further reductions by 2030 of 40 to 60 per cent below 2000 levels".¹¹ These are more ambitious targets than those to which our current government has committed. However, given that these do not aim for the 1.5 degrees centigrade warming limit aspired to at Paris, and given the uncertainties inherent in modelling, and the harms we are already witnessing at a lower level of warming, we prefer to endorse the expert-derived targets recommended by the Climate and Health Alliance (of which we are a member). These are:

- "a minimum target of 20% of 2000 levels by 2020;
- a minimum of 40% of 2000 levels by 2025;
- a minimum of 60% of 2000 levels by 2030;
- a minimum of 80% of 2000 levels by 2035;
- full decarbonisation by 2040; and
- negative net emissions by 2050."¹²

Electricity generation

We believe that reform of Australia's electricity generation systems is vital to mitigation of climate change. We have commented at greater length on this in our submission to the Finkel review of the National Electricity Market.²

In summary, the points we made were:

- Electricity derived from fossil fuels contributes very substantially to Australia's carbon dioxide emissions.¹³
- Combustion of fossil fuels (especially but not only coal) also has more immediate health impacts such as respiratory and cardiovascular disease, due to air pollution.^{5,14-16}
- Unusual weather events have already threatened the reliability of our electricity systems, and unmitigated climate change will add to the risk of future weather events and electricity system disruption.¹⁷⁻¹⁹
- Australia must rapidly transition away from coal as a source of electricity production.
- There is little if any role for gas as a transitional technology as it is also very polluting (less than coal but much more than renewable technologies). Further, fugitive methane emissions, especially from unconventional gas extraction technologies, may cancel out any supposed climate benefit over coal.^{20,21}
- There is no role for "low emission coal technology"; this is a misnomer which describes a more polluting and more expensive source of electricity than renewables.^{13,22}
- The problems of intermittency in renewable energy technologies are probably popularly overstated;²³ modelling by several independent groups (including the Universities of Melbourne and NSW, the Australian National University and the Australian Energy Market Operator) has found that a transition to 100% renewable electricity production is feasible and affordable for Australia.²⁴⁻²⁷
- While there may be adverse effects on communities from the loss of fossil fuel sector jobs, these effects can be minimised by careful transition planning.
- There is also great opportunity for new employment in the renewable energy sector, where with the right policy setting new jobs could outnumber job losses in fossil fuel industries.²⁸

We refer readers to our submission to the National Electricity Market review for further details.²

Households, small enterprise and the built environment

As an organisation fundamentally concerned with equity, the Doctors Reform Society shares the concern voiced in the discussion paper that the benefits of rooftop solar systems and energy efficient appliances will be unevenly distributed. Many financially vulnerable people will struggle to afford the upfront capital

required to invest in these ultimately financially beneficial technologies. Meanwhile, opportunities to further mitigate climate change are missed. We support policies to increase affordability of and access to these technologies for many Australians, independent of their income or rental status. Further, we would support strong regulations to support energy efficiency improvements in new and existing buildings.

We commend the government's commitment to a phase-down of use of hydrofluorocarbon (HFC) use as part of the international Kigali agreement.²⁹ We suggest though that the government should investigate ways to hasten the phase-down of HFCs compared to current plans.

Transport

Like fossil fuel electricity production, fossil fuels burnt for transportation contribute in two different ways to adverse health outcomes. One is by carbon pollution leading to climate change. The other is by particulate air pollution. A reduction in dependence on fossil fuels for transportation will help with both of these issues. While the discussion paper lists some tentative steps towards improved fuel economy standards and emissions reductions, we would support considerably more ambitious changes, including a move towards electrification of much motorised transportation, which would significantly reduce carbon pollution if coupled with the transition to renewable energy for which we also advocate.

We note that international shipping and aviation pollution are not counted as part of our national emissions. Nevertheless, pollution from these sectors is very important, and we encourage the government to contribute towards robust international policies to reduce pollution from these sectors.

Also, we should think more broadly than motorised transportation when planning a climate-friendly transportation system. Active transportation such as cycling and walking offers significant health co-benefits. For example, commuting by bicycle is associated with substantially lower risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer and death.³⁰ We support policies that encourage active transportation, including that design of street and neighbourhood infrastructure that helps to enable such transportation.

Research, development, innovation and technology

It will be vital for Australia and the world to have high quality research into climate change. We need to understand how the climate is changing, the effects of this on our world, and the best ways to mitigate and adapt to such change. We agree with the discussion paper that renewable energy represents an important global growth industry. Australia has enormous natural solar and wind resources which, with the correct policy settings, might be harnessed not just to provide clean energy but also to create jobs and establish a competitive advantage for Australia.³¹ It is therefore with dismay that we have witnessed the present government cutting funding to CSIRO climate research,³² flirting with the idea of allowing the Clean Energy Finance Corporation to fund coal stations,³³ and cutting funding to the Australian Renewable Energy Agency, leading to uncertainty and disinvestment by industry in clean energy.³⁴

Our health sector

While not specifically discussed in the discussion paper, we note that health systems are significant contributors to carbon pollution.³⁵ The well-known dictum that doctors should "first do no harm" applies, we believe, to our healthcare system's environmental impact. Transitioning our electricity system to renewable energy would negate the stationary energy component of the health system's carbon footprint, but much of the health system footprint comes from procurement, travel and waste.³⁶ We would support policies aimed at improving processes of audit and continuous improvement within the health system to help catalyse a shift to a greener health system. Such support should be protected; we fear that when protected funding is unavailable, it may be easy for immediate clinical needs to overwhelm equally important but less tangible concerns such as carbon emissions.

Conclusion

We believe, as does the World Health Organisation, in “health in all policies” – that health impacts should be considered in all policy-making processes.²¹ With regards to Australia’s climate change policies, we believe whole-of-system planning must include health – not just the health system, but also climate change and air pollution as serious environmental determinants of health. Ministers and energy market institutions need to consider and address these health issues in their policymaking and decision-making. Acknowledgment of a broadly shared responsibility for minimising adverse health impacts should strengthen the will of policymakers to transition as quickly as practical to an electricity system with a minimum of air pollution and greenhouse gas emissions. To this end, we support the call by Australia’s Climate and Health Alliance for the development of a National Strategy for Climate, Health and Wellbeing.³⁷

For the health of Australians, and all other people with whom Australians share our planet, we believe the Australian government must show much greater ambition and move as quickly as possible to a decarbonised future. The time for parliamentary scuffles over the reality of climate change is long past. We appeal to government and all political parties to unite in seizing the opportunities offered to us by a decisive response to the challenge of climate change.

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