

The Medical Journal of Australia • MJA

MEDIA RELEASE

AUSTRALIAN CLIMATE CHANGE INACTION THREATENS LIVES

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THE health of Australians is vulnerable to climate change, and policy inaction threatens lives and sees us lagging behind other high income countries, according to the authors of a major collaboration between the *Medical Journal of Australia* and *The Lancet*, published online today.

A group of 19 experts from 13 universities and research institutes, co-led by Dr Ying Zhang, from the University of Sydney's School of Public Health, and Associate Professor Paul Beggs, from Macquarie University's Department of Environmental Sciences, has produced the inaugural *MJA-Lancet* Countdown, an assessment of progress on climate change and health, which will be updated annually.

The assessment examines 41 indicators across five broad sections: climate change impacts, exposures and vulnerability; adaptation, planning and resilience for health; mitigation actions and health co-benefits; economics and finance; and public and political engagement.

"Overall, we find that Australia is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change on health, and that policy inaction in this regard threatens Australian lives," Zhang and colleagues wrote.

"In a number of respects, Australia has gone backwards and now lags behind other high income countries such as Germany and the United Kingdom. Examples include the persistence of a very high carbon-intensive energy system in Australia, and its slow transition to renewables and low carbon electricity generation.

"However, we also find some examples of good progress, such as heatwave response planning."

Included is a new indicator on mental health.

"In Australia, hot days have a damaging effect on whole-population mental health equivalent to that of unemployment and predict hospitalisation for self-harm," Zhang and colleagues wrote.

"This association is reversed in cooler locations, where elevated suicide rates are predicted by cooler maximum temperatures ... Adaptation planning for unusually hot or cold weather could usefully consider the interaction between suicide, gender, jurisdiction and local climate, with the aim of weakening temperature-suicide associations."

"Given the overall poor state of progress on climate change and health in Australia, this country now has an enormous opportunity to take action and protect human health and lives.

"Australia has the technical knowhow and intellect to do this, and our annual updates of this assessment will track Australia's engagement with and progress on this vitally important issue," they concluded.

Please remember to credit *The MJA*.

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