

True to his calling

Professor Kingsley Faulkner has combined a surgical career with fierce anti-tobacco advocacy and now, as chair of the Doctors for the Environment Australia, he argues that the health profession must take climate change seriously

ON 16 July 2017, the Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull said: “Those people who say coal and other fossil fuels have no future are delusional, and they fly in the face of all of the economic forecasts”, after his government failed to deliver a clean energy target at the Commonwealth of Australian Governments meeting. For Professor Kingsley Faulkner, chair of Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA), it was a low moment in the battle to convince Federal and state governments to take climate change and its consequences for human health seriously.

“Malcolm Turnbull would have been wiser to avoid the word delusional,” Professor Faulkner tells the *MJA*. “It reflects the continuing influence of climate change denial and is certainly derogatory to all who have grave concerns for the future posed by unrestrained coal and other fossil fuel usage.”

The last time the *MJA* spoke with Professor Faulkner was almost 5 years ago. He was encouraged and optimistic about the upcoming generation of doctors and the way the climate change debate was going in terms of national policy discussions and health professionals’ engagement.

Today, he is disappointed in the way things have turned out so far.

“It’s a tragedy that the federal government and some of the state governments have not taken [climate change] as seriously as we require them to,” he says.

“[The DEA] is disturbed that major groups such as the Australian Medical Association (AMA) have not been as strong on this issue as we’d like them to be. Even the internal survey the AMA did themselves said that 30% of the respondents were either skeptical or in complete denial about climate change, or at least did not want the AMA to get involved.”

Professor Faulkner has been a public health advocate for decades. Early in his medical career he spent time in

WA’s Pilbara district with the Royal Flying Doctors Service. At that time the Wittenoom blue asbestos mine had been closed and he became aware of the tragedy of asbestos.

“We’re still losing hundreds each year to the consequences of that mine and its product,” he says.

He was chair of the Australian Council on Smoking and Health (ACOSH) from 1983 to 1990 and deputy chair ever since, and has seen in policies such as plain packaging that made Australia a leading nation in the fight against Big Tobacco. It’s a battle that still gives him hope about climate change advocacy.

“We saw the same thing with tobacco,” he says. “There was skepticism and denial for decades until eventually people started coming around and now we lead the world when it comes to tobacco.

“But Australia is lagging far behind when it comes to climate change policy. We’re dragging our feet.

“Both *The Lancet* and the World Health Organization have said that climate change is the greatest threat to global health this century.

“If we’re not hearing that and doing things about it, then something is terribly wrong.”

Parts of the commercial world are starting to get it, he says.

“Insurance companies, superannuation companies, the Australian Institute of Company Directors – they’re starting to create public documents saying that if they are not taking climate change seriously and changing their policies to deal with it, then they are in dereliction of their duties,” says Professor Faulkner. “That’s a major change that is beginning to happen.

“Peter Doherty, the Nobel Laureate, said recently that not only do doctors have a duty of care to their individual patients, they also have a duty of care to the global determinants of health, and climate change is certainly a major one of those.”



Professor Kingsley Faulkner

But what, practically speaking, can doctors do?

“We can do a lot,” says Professor Faulkner. “We can make it known to our patients and to our communities that we believe climate change is an issue that effects our health.

“There are 3000 deaths a year in this country due to air pollution. In the mining industry, black lung disease has re-emerged and that is a disgrace.

“There are cardiovascular and respiratory consequences, neurological consequences, and effects of rates of some cancers.”

Professor Faulkner believes the naturally conservative bent of the medical profession means many doctors and medical groups are reluctant to criticise a conservative government.

“They’d rather say, ‘oh it’s not our core business’, but it is,” he says.

“If people are serious about health, then they should be serious about climate change. The medical profession must be in [the debate] if we are true to our calling.

“We must be well-informed, and we must educate our colleagues, our patients and our community leaders. This is not something to be put off.”

Doctors for the Environment Australia can be found at <https://www.dea.org.au/>. DEA is rigorously a non-partisan organisation which aims to avoid showing any party political bias.

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