

The *Lancet* Countdown down under: tracking progress on health and climate change in Australia

Australia is set to join a global initiative to track progress on health and climate change

When it comes to climate change and human health, Australia has, in many respects, an impressive track record. The late Professor Tony McMichael led the international community in research and advocacy on this issue.^{1,2} In 2016, the Royal Australasian College of Physicians Climate Change and Health Working Party released position statements on climate change and health and the health benefits of mitigating climate change.^{3,4} Scientific articles on Australian health and climate change have been published since the mid-1990s, including in the *MJA*.⁵

As climate change marches on, we should pause to contemplate not only the spectrum of health impacts it may have in the future but also those it is imposing right now. As we end another Australian summer, the increasing threat of heatwaves and tropical cyclones and the direct and indirect deaths and diseases that accompany these should be at the forefront of our minds. Climate change also brings with it a multitude of more subtle, but no less important, ecosystem-mediated health impacts, including vector-borne diseases and respiratory diseases associated with air pollution and aeroallergens.⁶

Internationally, *The Lancet*, in partnership with University College London and a large team of collaborating academic institutions and intergovernmental organisations, has taken a leading role in state-of-the-art global assessments of climate change and human health, focusing on the management of the health effects of climate change and the policy responses. In 2009, *The Lancet* concluded that “climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century”.⁷ This work was further developed and reported on in 2015, pairing the earlier stark conclusion with the realisation that “tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century”.⁸ The latest evolution, the *Lancet* Countdown, examines progress on climate change and human health in the context of the Paris Agreement.^{9,10}

Ying Zhang¹

Paul J Beggs²

¹University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW.

²Macquarie University, Sydney, NSW.

ying.zhang@sydney.edu.au

The *Lancet* Countdown

The *Lancet* Countdown report on health and climate change⁹ was published online in October 2017 and will be updated annually through to 2030. It tracks progress on health and climate change across 40 indicators divided into 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.

The key messages emphasise the severity and magnitude of the climate change—human health challenge, but also highlight recent progress, opportunities and the important role of the health profession. The report makes clear that the human symptoms of climate change are unequivocal and potentially irreversible, and that the delayed response to climate change has jeopardised human life.⁹ But progress is now being made, and the voice of the health profession is essential in driving this forward and realising the health benefits of this response.⁹

Australia is one of the many countries considered across the globe by the *Lancet* Countdown. The report notes that Australia's Hospitals Contribution Fund joined the global value of funds committing to divestment from fossil fuel in early 2017.⁹ Although levels of private transport use remain high, there is some evidence of a decreased dependence on private motor vehicles in cities in Australia. Australia is also conspicuous through its absence of an emissions trading system and/or carbon tax. In terms of climate change impacts, the report notes the increasing vectorial capacity for the transmission of dengue fever in Australia over the period 1950 to 2015.⁹

Australia's countdown

From an Australian perspective, with our high level of carbon emissions per capita,¹¹ it will be important to reflect on our progress and how it compares with that of other countries, especially high income countries. A group of Australian experts from multiple disciplines is commencing work on our first national countdown report. The project recognises the importance of the climate change challenge in Australia, including its relevance to human health, and also the unique breadth

and depth of the Australian expertise in climate change and human health.

The Australian countdown will mirror the five domain sections of the *Lancet Countdown*, adopt the indicators used (where feasible and relevant to Australia), and include any useful additional indicators. The inaugural Australian report is planned for release in late 2018 and is expected to be updated annually.

We hope to raise awareness of health issues related to climate change among Australian medical professionals, who play a key role in reducing their risks. The Australian

countdown is also envisioned as a timely endeavour that will accelerate the Australian government response to climate change and its recognition of the health benefits of urgent climate action.

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