

# The *MJA*–*Lancet* Countdown on health and climate change: Australian policy inaction threatens lives

Australia joins a global initiative to track progress on health and climate change

In the 16 April 2018 issue of the *MJA*,<sup>1</sup> we reflected on Australia’s impressive track record of research and advocacy on climate change and health, and the international development of a leading global assessment, the *Lancet* Countdown, examining progress on climate change and human health in the context of the Paris Agreement. We also signalled that a multidisciplinary group of Australian experts was commencing work on the country’s first national Countdown report. We are delighted to announce that this report has now been published by the *MJA*,<sup>2</sup> with its online release synchronised to coincide with the publication of the *Lancet* Countdown 2018 global report.<sup>3</sup> Here, we provide a brief introduction to and summary of the Australian Countdown report, and encourage readers to access the full comprehensive report.<sup>2</sup>

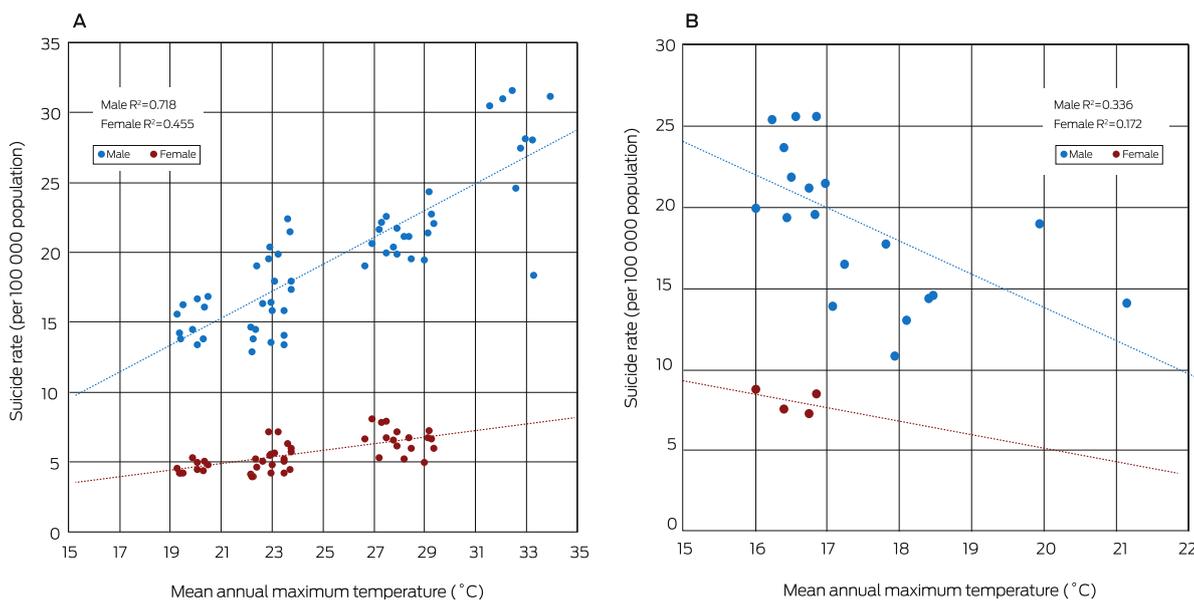
Climate is important to health and wellbeing, especially where climates are extreme and particularly variable, as in Australia. Despite having one of the world’s best health systems, the health of Australians is highly vulnerable to the country’s climate and weather extremes — exemplified by their direct impacts, as in the case of heatwaves, and also their indirect impacts, such as the world’s largest epidemic thunderstorm asthma event in Melbourne in November 2016.<sup>4</sup> Australia therefore needs a detailed understanding of and suite of health and wellbeing-related responses to the impacts of climate

change. The Australian Countdown report<sup>2</sup> is the first to examine Australia’s broad progress on climate change and human health, including its social, economic and political determinants, and progress towards mitigation and adaptation.

Global assessments have shown the impact of climate change on human health. Over the past decade, *The Lancet* and University College London have led a series of global assessments which have made clear the magnitude of the threat that climate change poses to human health. These assessments have also emphasised the corresponding opportunity to actively address this challenge, and most recently, the *Lancet* Countdown began tracking progress on health and climate change, to be repeated annually through to 2030.<sup>5–7</sup> This is consistent with the near-term timeline of the Paris Agreement. The Paris Agreement builds on the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and, for the first time, brings all nations into a common cause to undertake ambitious efforts to combat climate change and adapt to its effects.<sup>8</sup>

Through a partnership between *The Lancet*, University College London and the *MJA*, Australia is one of a select few countries to undertake their first national Countdown assessments. The inaugural Australian Countdown is a comprehensive assessment examining

Association between mean annual maximum temperature and suicide rate, by sex, in warmer (A) and cooler (B) Australian states and territories, 2007–2016



A: New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, Western Australia, South Australia and Northern Territory. B: Tasmania and Australian Capital Territory. ◆

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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. These indicators and the methods used for each are largely consistent with those of the *Lancet* Countdown global assessment published in October 2017,<sup>7</sup> but with an Australian focus. Notable developments include the addition of a new indicator on mental health. This is significant because climate change will have impacts on mental health, and yet developing an indicator to measure these has proved difficult.<sup>7</sup> With a novel foundation of systems thinking,<sup>9</sup> the Australian Countdown establishes a baseline against which to track future changes in this important area (Box).

Overall, the inaugural Australian Countdown finds that Australia is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change on health, and that policy inaction in this regard threatens Australian lives. 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 a slow transition to renewables and low-carbon electricity generation. However, the inaugural Australian Countdown also finds some examples of good progress, such as heatwave response planning. Given the overall poor state of progress on climate change and health in Australia, we now have an enormous opportunity to take action and protect human health and lives. Australia has the technical knowledge and intellect to do this, and the annual updates of the Australian Countdown assessment will track our engagement with and progress on this vitally important issue.

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This is a summary of the full *MJA–Lancet* Countdown report on health and climate change, available at <https://www.mja.com.au> ■

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