

The power of data in addressing planetary health, clinical practice and health worker wellbeing

In discussions around planetary health, biodiversity loss is often highlighted less than climate change and its effects. Yet, as the perspective by Barraclough and colleagues notes, biodiversity and its loss is critically important, including for human health (doi: 10.5694/mja2.51904). Australia has an appalling record on biodiversity and species loss as noted in findings from the 2021 State of the Environment (SOE) report. This is just the latest in a series of reports that draw on ongoing robust data collection from across Australia. The authors argue that biodiversity must be taken seriously: "It is imperative that we acknowledge human dependence on nature and respond to Australia's accelerating environmental decline with the same urgency as any other public health emergency." They note that "There are several key messages in the SOE report for the medical profession. First, we must recognise that Australia's environmental crisis is a health crisis. We need to use our positions as health experts to advocate for environmental protection for the sake of health." We agree and echo the final words quoted by the authors from Margaret Chan, former director of the World Health Organization: "A healthy planet and healthy people are two sides of the same coin".

The ongoing relation between planetary health and human health is highlighted by the medical education article by Allen and colleagues on Japanese encephalitis virus (JEV) (doi: 10.5694/mja2.51905). Doctors need to be aware that climate change will present new clinical challenges. Driven by the El Niña weather system, which was made more severe by climate change, leading to flooding in the eastern states of Australia in the past few years, there is now a risk that JEV will become endemic in Australia and will therefore require a change in diagnostic algorithm for encephalitis. As the authors note, JEV now needs to be considered as a differential diagnosis for encephalitis as "there is potential that JEV might become an ongoing seasonal challenge in temperate Australia".

A research article in this issue highlights the critical need to assess the mental health and wellbeing of the health workforce, especially during difficult times such as during the COVID-19 pandemic. McGuinness and colleagues did three sequential surveys over 12 months of health and aged care workers in Victoria in the second and third years of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2021 and 2022 (doi: 10.5694/mja2.51918). The findings are challenging and have substantial implications for the health workforce in the face of the pandemic that has not yet ended. The authors found that "measures of burnout, optimism, wellbeing, and resilience were poorer in late 2021 and mid-2022 than in mid-2021, but that measures of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress had improved between late 2021 and



mid-2022", suggesting the ongoing toll of the pandemic. Indeed, in the third survey in 2022, 54% of survey respondents reported considering leaving their profession. As the authors conclude, "greater support for sector-wide mental health and wellbeing support programs for health care workers is required". In a linked editorial, Harvey notes the power of findings such as these in highlighting where action is needed, noting that the report "strengthens the case for immediate action regarding the factors that research has identified as problems, including working hours, work-life balance, fatigue management, administrative burden, and appropriate supervision and resources". Harvey concludes that "Australia urgently needs better, nationally representative information about its health and aged care workforce, a discussion of its implications, and controlled trials of new workplace interventions".

Finally in this issue, I'd like to highlight the thoughtful reflection on the life and career of Professor Dame Valerie Beral by Canfell and colleagues (doi: 10.5694/mja2.51914). Professor Beral was a leader in so many ways in medical research, a role model for women in science and fierce champion of the power of data in health research, so much so that the authors report that "she once said that if she were stranded on a desert island the one luxury she would choose would be a dataset to analyse". ■

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