



Nuclear Disarmament

New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine Policy Statement

Policy statement

With persisting and irregular conflicts around the world, and the ongoing modernisation of nuclear arsenals and weapon delivery systems (eg, missiles), there is a pervading threat of nuclear war, nuclear terrorism, and accidental nuclear weapon explosions. All these outcomes would all have disastrous implications for human health, and a large-scale nuclear war could threaten the long-term viability of human civilisation. There is an urgent need for civil society and particularly all professional health organisations to encourage governments worldwide to rapidly progress nuclear disarmament.

The NZCPHM calls for:

1. New Zealand to demonstrate strong leadership around pressing for nuclear disarmament internationally, including the promotion of a Nuclear Weapons Convention.
2. New Zealand to extend its previous work at the United Nations in calling for all nuclear weapons to be taken off high alert.
3. New Zealand to invest more diplomatic and other resources in supporting nuclear disarmament advocacy and research, both nationally and internationally.

The NZCPHM also supports the nuclear disarmament policies of International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (IPPNW), The World Medical Association/NZ Medical Association, and the Public Health Association of NZ.

Background

Political and social instability in various parts of the world make the risk of a regional nuclear conflict, or a nuclear attack, a serious international concern. In 2009 it was stated, “In a strange turn of history, the threat of global nuclear war has gone down, but the risk of a nuclear attack has gone up”¹; this situation remains unchecked.² Despite progress in reducing Cold War nuclear arsenals, the world’s combined inventory of nuclear warheads remains at a very high level; nine countries possessed some 14,900 nuclear warheads as of early-2017,^{2,3} and as far back as 2003 some 40 more countries were thought to have the capability to build nuclear weapons within a matter of months.⁴ Modernisation of nuclear arsenals and improvements in weapon delivery systems are factors behind why the risk of nuclear conflict may be rising.^{5-8,1} Tension between the United States/NATO countries and Russia has been growing recently, and there is ongoing nuclear weapons testing (North Korea), elevated international tension in the South China Sea, and instability in Turkey (which hosts US nuclear weapons as part of NATO arrangements).

There are growing concerns that the effects of climate change will present a threat to collective security and global order in the first half of the 21st century.¹⁰ Indeed, climate change related conflicts could increase the risk of nuclear conflict.

Previous work has explored the impacts of nuclear¹¹ war on New Zealand,^{12,13} but this focused on full-scale wars between the US and the then Soviet Union. Contemporary research has updated and extended earlier studies to explore the effects of a regional nuclear conflict, such as a war between India and Pakistan.¹⁴⁻¹⁶ Such work indicates that this type of regional nuclear war (ie, one involving around 100 Hiroshima-sized nuclear bombs), could generate dust that spread to the atmosphere above New Zealand only 11 days after the attacks.¹⁷ This modelling also suggests that this dust could reduce the surface air temperature in New Zealand by two degrees Celsius in one to two years.¹⁵ These changes could directly harm New Zealand agriculture. However, this potential impact would probably be minor compared to the indirect impact arising from the social, environmental and economic devastation a nuclear conflict would cause in the many countries that New Zealand has close links with and trades with (and is therefore dependent on economically).

Indeed, tens of millions of people would be likely to die immediately in and around the cities attacked in any such regional nuclear war. The rapid spread of atmospheric dust around the world following an attack would bring about shortened growing seasons, severe frosts, reduced rainfall, monsoon failure and a substantial increase in ultraviolet radiation.^{16,18,19} The severe damage to global food production from such climatic changes would have enormous health consequences among the world's most vulnerable populations; an estimated one billion people worldwide could starve to death in the resulting famines and associated diseases (eg. infectious disease)^{18,20}

Actions

The New Zealand health sector has in the past raised concerns around the risk of nuclear war (eg, the NZ branch of the International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War [IPPNW]²¹), as has New Zealand more widely.²²⁻²⁴ But more could be done to prevent such potential wars and to promote nuclear disarmament internationally. There is a need for renewed action by the New Zealand Government, by disarmament officials and by New Zealand health workers to intensify efforts to promote nuclear disarmament in all international fora. This could include, in particular, working with a grouping of other like-minded, progressive, small and medium sized countries, in pushing for a Nuclear Weapons Convention²⁵ (or at least for alternative models towards nuclear weapons abolition).

Despite the end of the Cold War, several thousand nuclear weapons remain on high alert, ready to be launched within minutes. There is a need for further practical steps to decrease the operational readiness of nuclear weapons systems, to help ensure all nuclear weapons are removed from high alert status. New Zealand should extend its previous work at the United Nations by calling for all nuclear weapons to be taken off high alert (<http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/gadis3357.doc.htm>).

New Zealand does have officials in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade who work on nuclear disarmament issues, but with input but a fraction of the New Zealand defence budget. Hence there is good scope to expand this role and for greater funding of research activities (nationally and internationally) on how best to rapidly progress nuclear disarmament.

Other organisations

The NZCPHM supports the positions on nuclear disarmament of the following organisations:

- International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War (<http://www.ippnw.org/>)²⁶, including its past NZ Branch²¹.
- The World Medical Association²⁷, endorsed by the NZ Medical Association²⁸.
- The Public Health Association of Aotearoa/NZ²⁹.

Links with other NZCPHM policies

- Climate change (given the potential links this has with the risk of conflict⁷)

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ⁱ The **Doomsday Clock** charts the risks of nuclear war as follows:

2015⁷: "Unchecked climate change, global nuclear weapons modernizations, and outsized nuclear weapons arsenals pose extraordinary and undeniable threats to the continued existence of humanity, and world leaders have failed to act with the speed or on the scale required to protect citizens from potential catastrophe. These failures of political leadership endanger every person on Earth. Despite some modestly positive developments in the climate change arena, current efforts are entirely insufficient to prevent a catastrophic warming of Earth. Meanwhile, the United States and Russia have embarked on massive programs to modernize their nuclear triads—thereby undermining existing nuclear weapons treaties. The clock ticks now at just three minutes to midnight because international leaders are failing to perform their most important duty—ensuring and preserving the health and vitality of human civilization."

2017⁷: "For the last two years, the minute hand of the Doomsday Clock stayed set at three minutes before the hour, the closest it had been to midnight since the early 1980s. In its two most recent annual announcements on the Clock, the Science and Security Board warned: "The probability of global catastrophe is very high, and the actions needed to reduce the risks of disaster must be taken very soon." In 2017, we find the danger to be even greater, the need for action more urgent. It is two and a half minutes to midnight, the Clock is ticking, global danger looms. Wise public officials should act immediately, guiding humanity away from the brink. If they do not, wise citizens must step forward and lead the way."