



NZ Climate & Health Council

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**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**'Call to action on climate change and health' from health organisations**

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Ten New Zealand health organisations have released a joint 'Call to Action on Climate Change and Health' today.

The ten organisations, including national professional bodies for doctors, nurses, midwives and medical students, say they recognise climate change as an increasingly serious and urgent threat to health and fairness in New Zealand and worldwide. In contrast, they point to specific policy responses that provide exciting opportunities to improve health and create a fairer society.

The 'Call to Action' identifies serious health threats for New Zealanders, including direct impacts from extreme heat and weather events, changing patterns of infectious disease, and rising food prices impacting on nutrition.

"There will also be flow-on health effects from climate change impacts on people's livelihoods and homes in New Zealand and the Pacific – causing forced migration and mental health impacts" say Dr Rhys Jones and Dr Alex Macmillan, Co-convenors of OraTaiao: The NZ Climate and Health Council. "New Zealand has already had its first claim for refugee status on the basis of climate change impacts on Kiribati – this is a clear warning about what lies ahead" says Dr Jones.

"These health impacts will be worst for Māori, Pacific people, children, the elderly and low income households, worsening the unfair distribution of ill-health that already exists here" Dr Jones adds.

However the 'Call to Action' is also hopeful in stating that well-planned government and societal action on climate change in New Zealand could improve health and fairness if implemented urgently.

"Rapid moves to much more walking, cycling and public transport; a transition to healthier plant based diets; and energy efficient, warm homes will all help cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions while also reducing heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and respiratory disease" says Dr Macmillan. "New Zealand's carbon-intensive health sector should be leading by reducing its own emissions and helping society adapt to expected climate change impacts."

The 'Call to Action on Climate Change and Health' calls for a rapid, society-wide transition to a low GHG-emitting nation, in a way that improves health and fairness. It also calls for New Zealand to be a better leader in pushing for effective and fair global action to reduce GHG emissions.

"This call to action highlights climate change as a key health issue that requires an urgent response. The next five years really are 'make or break' in terms of avoiding the worst impacts of climate change and reaping the benefits, so we need leaders who can contribute effectively to global action. It is important that this is in New Zealanders' minds as they vote over the coming days" Dr Macmillan ends.

**ENDS**

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### Notes to editors:

Dr Rhys Jones (Ngāti Kahungunu) ([rg.jones@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:rg.jones@auckland.ac.nz)) is a Public Health Physician and Senior Lecturer in Māori Health at the University of Auckland. He is Co-convenor of OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council.

Dr Alex Macmillan ([alex.macmillan@otago.ac.nz](mailto:alex.macmillan@otago.ac.nz)) is a Public Health Medicine Specialist and Senior Lecturer in Environmental Health at the University of Otago Dunedin. Her research expertise is in the intersecting areas of urban planning, climate change and public health. She is Acting Co-convenor of OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council.

OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate & Health Council comprises senior doctors and other health professionals concerned with climate change as a serious public health threat. They also promote the positive health gains that can be achieved through action to address climate change. See: [www.orataiao.org.nz](http://www.orataiao.org.nz)

### Background

The 'Climate Change and Health: Health Professionals Joint Call for Action' September 2014 is available at [www.orataiao.org.nz](http://www.orataiao.org.nz). An abridged version was published in the NZ Herald on Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> September on Page 9.

### About Climate Change and Health

Climate and health information is available in the New Zealand College of Public Health Medicine's policy statement on climate change:

[http://www.nzcpmh.org.nz/media/67575/2013\\_11\\_6\\_climate\\_change\\_substantive\\_policy\\_final-corrected .pdf](http://www.nzcpmh.org.nz/media/67575/2013_11_6_climate_change_substantive_policy_final-corrected.pdf)

Human-caused climate change is a serious and urgent threat to human health. Climate change and its environmental effects (e.g. warmer temperatures, more heat waves, altered rainfall patterns, more extreme weather such as heavy rainfall events and/or drought, tropical storms, sea-level rise) result in many risks to human health, both direct and indirect, that are recognised by world health authorities and leading medical journals alike.

Globally, leading health threats include water and food shortages, extreme weather events, and changing patterns of infectious disease. In NZ there will also be new health and social pressures relating to climate migrant and refugee populations arriving in NZ and flow-on health impacts from changes in the global economy. NZ already has a relatively high burden of several diseases that are sensitive to climatic conditions, and climate trends may already be affecting the health of New Zealanders.

The health impacts of climate change most seriously affect people in developing countries, and the most disadvantaged and vulnerable within all countries.

### Health Co-benefits of Climate Action

Addressing climate change is an opportunity to improve population health and reduce inequities (unfair differences in health between different population groups). In NZ, well-designed policies to reduce greenhouse gas emissions can bring about substantial health co-benefits including reductions in heart disease, cancer, obesity, Type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal disease, respiratory disease, and

motor vehicle injuries, and improvements in mental health - with resultant cost savings for the health care system.

These co-benefits arise because some emission reductions measures impact on important determinants of health, especially energy intake (nutrition) and expenditure (physical movement). Housing insulation, clean energy, great public transport and safer walking and cycle ways will all give a double benefit. They give immediate health benefits, especially to New Zealand's poorest families, and also lead the way on reducing carbon emissions. For example:

- Active transport (walking, cycling, public transport) improves physical activity, reduces emissions, and can reduce air pollution and road traffic injuries. Walking and cycling are inexpensive, and public transport is used proportionately more by people with lower incomes – with benefits to health, climate and equity.
- Healthy eating, including increased plant and less red meat and animal fat consumption, would reduce the emissions associated with food production and likely lead to reduced rates of bowel cancer and heart disease.
- Improving indoor environments (e.g. energy efficiency measures such as home insulation) can reduce illnesses associated with cold, damp housing (e.g. childhood asthma and chest infections which are leading causes of hospital admissions, particularly for Māori and Pacific children).
- Increasing energy efficiency and/or moving away from fossil fuels would reduce health-damaging air pollution (e.g. particulates) from fuel combustion, in both indoor and outdoor environments, with large health gains.

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