

NZINDC expert public meeting 18 May 2015

Notes

OraTaiao: NZ Climate & Health Council – part of a global movement of doctors and other .

“Continuation of high fossil fuel emissions, given current knowledge of the consequences, would be an act of extraordinary witting intergenerational injustice. Responsible policymaking requires a rising price on carbon emissions that would preclude emissions from most remaining coal and unconventional fossil fuels and phase down emissions from conventional fossil fuels.” James Hanson 2013

The main responsibility for this action must fairly fall on the wealthiest nations with the highest emissions. New Zealand is one of those.

The government’s discussion document certainly does not represent “responsible policymaking”.

Why health professionals?

CC is not a fringe environmental issue, but one that is central to human wellbeing and survival – it’s at the heart of what we want as NZers... secure future for our children, less poverty, more fairness, social stability and safeguarding the things we rely on for our health and wellbeing – like freshwater, human-friendly weather patterns, adequate healthy and affordable food.

Both the British Medical Journal and The Lancet have called climate change the greatest public health threat facing us.

Health professionals have previously played a leadership role in in taking action to reduce global threats to wellbeing, including the threat of nuclear war and we are starting to see this happen globally about climate change

Most hopefully, if we place human health at the centre of climate policy, re-framing it as an issue of health and wellbeing, we can build political will and put in place policies to combat climate change that also bring exciting co-benefits for health and fairness – I’ll come back to these at the end.

Health impacts globally and in NZ

We can say with a high degree of certainty that climate change is already having important effects on health and wellbeing globally, including in New Zealand, with increasing heat waves, flooding, droughts and severe weather events, increasing food prices and loss of fish and shellfish stocks, increasing water and food-borne illness, and changing infectious disease patterns.

The future impacts of health depend heavily on our urgent actions to mitigate and are not currently being counted in the government’s discussion document.

As well as worsening of the very direct physical health impacts I've already described, the prospect of a future of uncontrollable climate change will continue to bring worsening fear, anxiety and depression for many, especially young people – uncontrollable climate change would leave a legacy that would last uncountable generations.

The building blocks for health, a stable society and economy, healthy housing and safe, affordable, healthy food will also increasingly be affected through loss of climate-sensitive primary industry (we're already seeing this with summer droughts and loss of mussel stocks); sea level rise and coastal erosion; poor adaptation of housing to increasing heat; and an increasing influx of climate refugees from the Pacific putting pressure on all our social systems.

Maori, Pacific and low-income groups are at risk of greater impacts of climate change. We also have the potential to increase or decrease existing systematic injustices for these groups through our choices about action – especially how we distribute the costs and the benefits.

But as I said before, there are also exciting opportunities for health, wellbeing and fairness from strong, well-being centred climate action in New Zealand.

Direct improvements for health are possible for heart disease, lung disease, cancer, obesity, joint problems, diabetes, road traffic injuries, and mental health, with big savings for the health system and the economy that aren't being counted in the government's document.

Burning fossil fuels has previously made substantial contributions to improving the lives of many in wealthy countries (often at the expense of the poor). However, we've reached a time when keeping our current level of wellbeing and improving health rely us to make big behavioural and policy transitions away from fossil fuels. Benefits to health would then fall into five main areas:

MOVING AWAY FROM COAL – will improve air and water quality reduce mining injuries and deaths, and could transition boom and bust communities to a more resilient and healthy future

A shift from car-dependency and road freight to active and public **TRANSPORT**, clean rail and shipping would bring exercise and neighbourhood connection back into people's daily lives, while reducing air pollution and road traffic injuries. Warm, energy efficient **HOUSING** and transitioning to clean, climate-friendly home heating would reduce winter deaths from lung and heart disease and improve social justice by reducing days of school and work for the poorest families

A **LOW-RUMINANT ECONOMY** and **DIET** would reduce obesity, heart disease and cancer, improve the quality of freshwater and could improve the affordability of healthy local plant-based food

ASSISTING LOW INCOME COUNTRIES, through funding and technology transfer, to take a climate-friendly path of economic development could improve women's health by addressing unmet need for family planning services; achieve massive reductions in indoor air pollution deaths and reduce global health inequalities.

To avoid the health risks and achieve the potential gains fairly, NZ needs to include the costs and benefits to health and equality in its calculations; set consistent, clear, adequate targets and put human wellbeing and fairness at the centre of well-designed policies to meet those targets. I've supplied copies of OraTaiao's written submission guideline, hot off the press – as well as three health questions to ask at the public meeting on Thursday.

"It makes no sense (to me) to spread fear and anxiety here and now, in order to reach a non-existent future where all our problems will be solved, allowing us to finally dispense joy." Niki Harre

Let's ensure we are able to dispense joy now and into the future by speaking up loud for a New Zealand national climate commitment that is cross-party, ambitious, and centred on human wellbeing and social justice.

Tena koutou katoa