Carbon pricing is an important health protection policy that is vital for the public good, according to an editorial published in the latest Medical Journal of Australia (MJA).

Professor Philippa Howden-Chapman from the University of Otago, New Zealand and co-authors say there is incontrovertible evidence that human-induced climate change is occurring and will have profoundly negative health impacts.

Prof Howden-Chapman says that putting a price on carbon, via a tax or other means, enables societies to reduce their carbon emissions more efficiently by using the power of market forces.

“A carbon price is especially in the interests of those with low incomes, whose lives will be more disrupted by climate change than will the lives of the wealthy, and among whom the negative health impacts will be greater,” Prof Howden-Chapman said.

“Health sector organisations should therefore all support putting a price on carbon, along with other policies needed to transition to a low-carbon society.

“These organisations need to highlight the potential health benefits of such policies, while monitoring policy packages to ensure that, overall, they reduce inequalities in income and health.”

A Clinical Focus feature in this issue of the MJA discusses the effects of the mining and burning of coal on health and the environment.

Drs Castleden, Shearman, Crisp and Finch say that medical practitioners and other health experts are being asked about coal and its effect on health as community concerns about the expansion of coalmining and, latterly, of coal seam gas extraction are growing.

They said that the World Health Organization states that climate change is the greatest emerging threat to public health and to the environment.

“Coal-fired power stations are potent emitters of greenhouse gases and are important contributors to climate change,” they said.

“Climate change will profoundly affect some of the most fundamental prerequisites for good health: clean air and water, sufficient food, adequate shelter and freedom from disease.

“Australia’s coal contributes to climate change and its global health impacts. Each phase of coal’s lifecycle produces pollutants that can affect human health.

“The health impacts of climate change are beginning to be felt in Australia. The elderly, the very young, and those with existing heart and respiratory disease are vulnerable to the increase in heat waves due to climate change.
“To persist in mining and burning coal will condemn future generations to catastrophic climate change, which is clearly the biggest health problem of the future.

“Recently, the Australian government has announced it will introduce a carbon tax to mesh seamlessly into an emissions trading scheme”.

The authors support the initiative to put a price on carbon as an important public health measure.

In a Letter to the Editor, Dr Joseph Smith and Professor Guy Maddern from the University of Adelaide explain that global warming will have implications for surgery and surgical practice.

They say that one of the practical implications of research in the field of surgery and climate change will be the need for future modelling of future demands for surgical intervention in Australia.

“The range of trauma impact due to climate change needs to be defined, and the incidence with which this is likely to occur needs to be determined, based on climate change modelling,” they say.

“With this information, models of future demand for surgical interventions can be determined.”

Dr Smith and Prof Maddern cite the extreme weather that led to the 2009 Victorian “Black Saturday” bushfires as an example of the type of event that may become more frequent as global warming increases.

The Medical Journal of Australia is a publication of the Australian Medical Association.