



11 August 2020

The Hon. Scott Morrison, MP
Prime Minister of Australia
PO Box 6500
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

Australia's doctors call for a post-COVID-19 #HealthyRecovery

Firstly, we would like to recognise your leadership of the National Cabinet in steering our country through the initial phases of the COVID-19 public health crisis. Australian health professionals, scientists, and our colleagues overseas, have stood together to support an approach based on scientific evidence to managing the COVID-19 pandemic. Thank you for heeding our advice. We now join international health voices in urging our political leaders to put health at the centre of economic recovery plans.

The world is in the middle of two global health emergencies: the viral pandemic and climate change.

As we continue efforts to limit the spread of the COVID-19 virus, we must ensure that we also have a whole-of-government approach towards addressing climate change, which also has potentially catastrophic health impacts.

Carbon pollution and associated global warming will have profound consequences on the fundamentals of human health: clean air, water, access to food and a safe climate.

Global warming is already exposing Australia to more frequent and severe bushfires, extreme heat events, droughts and storms. These events will continue to have serious impacts on both physical and psychological health, as previous disasters have demonstrated.

The 2019-20 'Black Summer' bushfires claimed 33 lives, while associated smoke engulfed our cities for weeks causing respiratory, cardiovascular and ocular complications^{1,2}. The smoke resulted in over 1300 presentations to emergency departments with asthma, more than 3000 hospitalisations for heart and lung problems and 417 excess deaths¹. The mental health impacts of the bushfires are likely to be present for decades.

The fossil fuel combustion that drives global warming is also a major contributor to air pollution—every year this silent killer is linked to the premature deaths of 3000 Australians. Higher levels of air pollution are associated with increasing illness and death related to ischaemic heart disease, chronic obstructive airways disease, lung cancer and asthma^{1,3}, and also with adverse outcomes in pregnancy, including low birthweight and stillbirth⁴. The annual cost to Australia from air pollution mortality alone is estimated to be \$11.1- \$24.3 billion⁵.

Unabated climate change threatens our water supplies and food-growing capacity and could ultimately challenge our capacity to survive in many regions of this continent. On current trends, the accumulated loss of wealth due to reduced agricultural and labour productivity alone is projected to be \$4 trillion by 2100⁶.

A health-centred economic approach would support a transition away from fossil fuels, both coal and gas, to renewables and invest in projects and technologies that preserve our natural environment. Redirecting funds from fossil fuel subsidies towards the production of renewable energy would produce cleaner air, significantly reduce emissions and power an economic recovery⁷. A shift to active transport and public transport powered by electricity would also markedly improve air quality, as would moving to private electric vehicles.

Addressing climate change can also bring health benefits. Green infrastructure to support walking, cycling and other active transport and investment in public transport would help promote physical activity and reduce the risks of obesity, diabetes, and a range of other chronic diseases^{8,9}.

Climate change is a public health emergency. Failing to mitigate and prepare for climate change risks potentially catastrophic health and economic impacts. Australia has an unparalleled opportunity to act on climate change and invest in a cleaner, healthier, and more prosperous future. We urge the Australian government to ensure that health remains a central focus of all aspects of the COVID-19 economic recovery and to support a healthy transition to a climate resilient economy.

References

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