Climate Health and Wellbeing Position Statement

Background

Climate change poses the greatest health threat to humans.[1] It has profound risks and impacts on health, particularly for vulnerable populations such as older people, people with chronic conditions, those who are socio-economically disadvantaged, people with a disability, women, girls, and people who are from a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse background.[2]

Climate change impacts social determinants of health, including housing, food, and water.[3] It has resulted in observed increase and intensity and frequency of extreme weather events[4] as well as food and water insecurity.[5] These effects have significant impacts on physical and mental health, including increased risks of infectious diseases and exposure to pollutants, particularly through extreme weather events.[6]

As a member of the Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA), HCCA has based our climate policy positions around the *CAHA Framework for a National Strategy on Climate*. The CAHA framework provides compelling evidence for the need for meaningful change to address the global climate change crisis. The policy positions presented in the Framework aim to help the Australian government address climate impacts and meet their obligations under the Paris Agreement. [7] HCCA is committed to promoting a sustainable and resilient future for Australia and aligning ourselves with CAHA's goals in advocating for effective climate action.

What We Advocate for as an Organisation

HCCA adopts the following positions on four key climate change issues.

1. Environmental Sustainability

Reduction of plastics and single use items in health care

The health care sector is a significant contributor to greenhouse gas emissions, waste products and natural resource consumption. This threatens our present and

future health. In Australia emissions are estimated at over seven percent of Australia's total CO2 emissions.[8] We need healthcare providers to promote both financial and environmental sustainability, while also reducing carbon emissions and prioritising high-value care.

Action can be taken to reduce emissions and the effects on climate from health care, such as reducing low-value care (care where the harms and risks of medical tests and procedures outweigh any benefits).[9]

Other initiatives that have the potential to contribute to sustainability in health care include:

- reviewing prescribing habits,
- reducing single use plastics in surgery,[10] and
- minimising hazardous waste and compostable rubbish going to landfill, particularly from operating rooms.[11]
- Switching chemical cleaning to steam sterilising,
- Reducing emission of gases and vapours

HCCA advocates for governments at both a territory and federal level, as well as health service organisations, to implement strategies to reduce single use items and plastics in health care delivery and to adopt more sustainable practices.

Innovative Infrastructure and sustainable procurement data collection

Innovative infrastructure is critical component of addressing climate change and promoting sustainability. Procuring sustainable building materials and following green design principles can improve energy use, ventilation, disease control measures, green spaces and reduce construction waste overall.

Sustainable procurement of equipment and medical materials should also be prioritised. Data shows that 70% of Australia's health care greenhouse gas emissions are from clinical care and consumables.[12] Once sustainable design has been implemented, services can continue reducing their organisation's greenhouse gas emissions by collecting and analysing data on their procurement of goods, consumption, and waste. When resource use of energy, water, hazardous and non-hazardous waste are monitored, services can identify potential shifts to more sustainable sources, reduction measures and policies to reduce their impact on the climate.

HCCA advocates for the incorporation of sustainable design principles, innovative infrastructure, and quality data collection to reduce environmental impacts and promote sustainable practices.

Implement innovative and integrated Models of Care

Innovative models of care that prioritise environmental sustainability are essential. Addressing climate change requires cooperation among government, businesses, academics, and communities to develop connected solutions that consider the relationship between infrastructure design, health, and climate policy. This involves coordination between healthcare areas and providers, changes in clinical guidelines to reflect environmental sustainability, and the use of new technologies.[13,14]

HCCA advocates for the establishment of a small unit in the Health Directorate, to focus on sustainability in health care, looking at the impact of all these factors to access climate change with a connected solution.

2. Health Care in Emergencies

Pandemics

The COVID-19 global pandemic has highlighted the health challenges triggered by pandemics and health emergencies, both globally and across Australia. Evidence shows that climate change has increased transmission of infectious diseases[15], potentially increasing the prevalence of epidemics and pandemics.[16] Emergency preparedness is vital to ensure the safety and quality of health care for consumers during future pandemics.

HCCA advocates for government action to prepare for future pandemics, including emergency preparedness plans and adequate supplies of equipment not only for health service organizations but also primary health settings.

Extreme Weather Events

Extreme weather events have become more common as the impacts of climate change are felt across the globe.[17] This may include:
- heat respite centres and policies around accessing public drinking water during heat waves,
- access to safe and clean air during bushfires,
- strategies to deal with the outbreak of infectious and vector-borne diseases,
- backup energy supplies during storms, and
- assistance in coping with extreme cold during Canberra's harsh winters.

HCCA advocates for the ACT Government and facilities to develop mitigation strategies that assist consumers to deal with the health impacts of climate-related hazards and extreme weather events.[18] The territory government ensure communities who are most at risk during these extreme events (such as older people and people with disabilities) have specific strategies to reach and assist those community members.

3. Access to Health Care

Changes to Health Care Delivery Models

The health care sector plays an important role in mitigating the effects of climate change.[19] Changes to the delivery of health care can be effective at creating sustainable change, particularly through methods already adopted and preferred by consumers. This includes the use of telehealth and delivery of care that is closer to home,[20] promoting more sustainable transport options, making commitments to reducing unnecessary business trips and providing charging stations for EVs.

Innovative models of care that reduce carbon footprints and emissions can help reduce the effects of climate change on the planet, but also provide flexible and consumer-centred care.

HCCA advocates for health service organisations and primary care services to provide innovative methods of health care delivery, such as telehealth and care closer to home, to help reduce the impacts of climate change.

Mental Health

Concerns about climate change may result in uncertainty, stress, and mental ill-health. Assistance for people with jobs in industries which will need to change is an important structural adjustment strategy, specifically including retraining and relocation. Resilience and hope are key human resources and supporting access to mental health services is also important in a time of change.[21] Climate change mitigation and adjustment strategies can deliver positive health outcomes. The community should be made aware of the negative health impacts of climate change and the potential positive health outcomes from climate change mitigation and adaptation.[22]

HCCA advocates for the governments at all levels to consider the mental health impacts of climate change and provide adequate funding to allow consumers access to support and care as they deal with the ongoing impacts of climate change.

4. Consumer Participation

Consumer-Centred Planning and Policy

People and our health must be central to climate change policy and action. People need good health, a good environment, and a strong community to flourish. Climate change policy by governments and organisations at all levels should ensure that the social determinant of health is addressed.

HCCA advocates at a systemic level to governments and organisations that human rights and social needs are considered (including housing and access to health care) as part of climate policies.

Empowering Consumers Through Health Literacy

Empowering consumers to adapt to climate change through skills, knowledge and resources through health literacy. Health promotion professionals can play a role as part of the broader health system in helping individuals adapt to impacts of climate change.[23]

HCCA works to empower consumers through a community development and health literacy framework. We aim to provide skills and knowledge to help consumers adapt to climate change and its associated health implications through a variety of tailored health literacy presentations delivered to individuals, community groups, and community workers In line with CAHA's Framework we also advocate for national education program to create awareness and provide specific strategies for communities to adapt to the challenges of climate change.[24]

About HCCA

Health Care Consumers' Association (HCCA) is the peak health consumer organisation in the ACT. We work to improve the quality and safety of health services and advocate for health equity for people living in the Canberra region. We provide a voice for consumers on health issues and provide opportunities for consumers to participate in all levels of health service planning, policy development and decision making.

Authorisation and review

Endorsed by the HCCA Executive Committee March 2023
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