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# Sustainable Healthcare Module

## Supporting sustainable and climate resilient healthcare

### CAHA Submission

January 2023

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### Introduction

The World Health Organization has described climate change as the defining issue for public health in the 21st century. It is an urgent challenge, with implications at the global, national and community levels.

Climate change affects health in many ways; directly by the increased intensity and frequency of extreme weather events, such as prolonged heatwaves, floods and bushfires; and indirectly through worsening air quality, changes in the spread of infectious and vector-borne diseases, risks to food safety and drinking water quality, and effects on mental health<sup>1</sup>.

Climate change contributes to an increased risk of infectious diseases, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, asthma, allergies, mental illness, psychosocial impacts, violence, poor nutrition, injury, poisoning and mortality<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Climate and Health Alliance, Climate change is a health issue, Briefing Paper No.1, 2018. Available at: [https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/caha/pages/33/attachments/original/1539054808/CAHA\\_Briefing\\_Paper\\_1\\_Climate\\_change\\_is\\_a\\_health\\_issue\\_2018.pdf](https://d3n8a8pro7vnm.cloudfront.net/caha/pages/33/attachments/original/1539054808/CAHA_Briefing_Paper_1_Climate_change_is_a_health_issue_2018.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

As a result, healthcare services are adversely affected, with those living in rural and remote areas, who may already have increased risk of ill health because of limited access to services, impacted most severely<sup>3</sup>. Healthcare services in Australia have experienced dramatic increases in service demand from climate change-related extreme weather events, including heatwaves, storms, floods, as well as bushfires and associated smoke pollution<sup>4</sup>. For example, during the 2019-20 Australian megafires there were over 400 excess deaths due to smoke inhalation and thousands more presentations to health services<sup>5</sup>.

Health services in Australia are already being directly affected by extreme weather associated with climate change, as we have recently witnessed from the extreme and widespread flooding in Australia<sup>6</sup>. Extreme weather can impact health service organisations infrastructure, operations and supply chains.

Paradoxically, the health sector in Australia is responsible for approximately 7% of total national emissions<sup>7</sup>. Globally, the healthcare sector is responsible for approximately 4.4% of total global emissions<sup>8</sup>. The health sector has a moral imperative to reduce its contribution to climate change to ensure it is playing its part to protect the health and wellbeing of current and future generations.

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<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> ibid

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/bushfire-smoke-responsible-over-400-excess-deaths>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2022/217/9/2022-report-mja-lancet-countdown-health-and-climate-change-australia-unprepared>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-51961730180-8/fulltext>

<sup>8</sup> <https://noharm-global.org/documents/health-care-climate-footprint-report>

## About CAHA

The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) is a national charity and the peak body on climate change and health in Australia. CAHA is an alliance of organisations within the health sector working together to raise awareness about the health risks of climate change and the health benefits of emissions reductions.

The membership of CAHA includes a broad cross-section of health sector stakeholders with over 100 member organisations, representing healthcare professionals from a range of disciplines, as well as healthcare service providers, institutions, academics, researchers, and consumers.

## Acknowledgement

The Climate and Health Alliance recognises Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People as the traditional custodians of the land on which we live and work, and acknowledge that sovereignty of the land we call Australia has never been ceded. We commit to listening to and learning from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people about how we can better reflect Indigenous ways of being and knowing in our work.

## Why climate and environmental action should be addressed by the Commission

Currently in Australia there is a lack of a national, consistent approach for health services to assess their sustainability and climate resilience. Health sector action for climate resilience and sustainability varies considerably across Australia and is not always seen as a necessary component of healthcare delivery. Health and health services are already being impacted by climate change. These impacts are in turn increasingly impacting the safety, effectiveness, access to, and efficiency of healthcare. Health service organisations need to be prepared for these impacts to ensure they can consistently provide safe and quality care.

Through the development of this module The Australian Commission on Safety and Quality in Healthcare (the Commission) is demonstrating that it has an important role to play in ensuring the health sector:

- Is prepared to deal with a changing burden of disease from climate change.
- Understands the risks climate change poses to healthcare operations, infrastructure, and supply chains, and takes measures to mitigate and adapt to these risks accordingly.
- Upholds its moral imperative to first do no harm and reduces its contribution to climate change and environmental harm.
- Provides high value care and uses resources efficiently.
- Realises opportunities to integrate environmental action with actions that benefit health.
- Avoids the future costs of inaction.
- Continues to provide safe, quality care in a climate affected world.

Furthermore, sustainability and climate action should be a focus for the Commission as these elements meet the criteria for inclusion in standards:

- Climate change is already frequently impacting the health and wellbeing of large numbers of people.
- Climate risks and environmental impacts are not being managed properly throughout the health sector in Australia, with considerable variation in the level of priority they are given
- There are evidence based strategies available to manage climate risk and sustainability, and some examples of best practice occurring within Australia
- Consumers rely on health services to remain operational during extreme weather events, which are being exacerbated by climate change

**CAHA recommends that the Commission commits to including sustainability and climate resilience within its remit.**

## Feedback on the draft Sustainable Healthcare Module

The Sustainable Healthcare Module is an effective mechanism for supporting health services to drive climate and sustainability action. The module:

- Supports health service organisations to include environmental measures and targets when setting priorities and strategies
- Provides a consistent approach to assessing a health service organisation's climate and sustainability work
- It provides an opportunity for health service organisations to audit their performance with regard to sustainability and climate risk, uncovering areas for further action.
- Provides a standardised assessment that would allow to monitor progress over time
- Provides a signal to health service organisations that the Federal Government encourages climate resilient and sustainable healthcare action
- Highlights the relationship between climate change, health impacts, health service impacts, and associated impacts on safety, quality and consistency of care
- Ensures the safety and quality of healthcare can be maintained and improved in a rapidly changing climate
- Demonstrates how climate resilience and environmental sustainability can be embedded within health services and supports the sharing of best practice
- Provides opportunities for health service organisations to simultaneously reduce environmental impacts and improve climate resilience, and provide high value care.

Overall the actions in the Module address the main elements required for progressing climate resilience and sustainable healthcare at a high level, including: leadership and governance; setting priorities; establishing baselines; setting targets; supporting implementation; tracking and reporting on performance; training and workforce capacity building; and collaboration between the governing body, management, health workforce and consumers.

### Recommendations:

As the Module is updated and health sector climate action advances, it would be ideal if specific actions focusing on climate adaptation and decarbonisation were included. This would ensure health service organisations are taking necessary steps towards preparing for climate change, reducing their contribution to climate change and ensuring safe and quality care continues.

Action 1 would be strengthened by including the following suggested strategies:  
(The governing body:)

- Clearly communicates who within the governance structure is ultimately responsible for meeting sustainability and climate resilience targets
- Provides appropriate resources for delivering sustainable and climate resilient healthcare

Action 2 would be strengthened by including a points on:

- Planning and implementing initiatives to reduce the health service organisation's carbon footprint explicitly
- Implementing changes to reduce the provision of low value care
- Including sustainability and climate resilience in continuous improvement process

Action 4 would be improved by including the governing body and management, along with the workforce, as groups of people who receive training to improve sustainability. For example training for the governing body to help them understand their climate risk management obligations.

The first dot point under suggested strategies for Action 4 should read:

Provides the workforce with access to training on sustainability, climate change and the effect on their local community and how to respond to climate events, including relevant disaster management frameworks.

Action 4 would also be improved by the inclusion of the following strategy:

- Engages in external sustainable healthcare networks to connect the workforce with resources, support and examples of best practice, and to contribute to sustainable healthcare action beyond the health service organisation

Action 5 would benefit from the inclusion of following suggested strategies:

- Ensure procurement includes environmental sustainability criteria
- Implement or develop a system for the workforce to collaborate on sustainability and climate resilience

It would be useful to outline that this Module has been developed to apply in any healthcare setting across Australia in the explanatory note. Include examples of the types of health service organisations that can use the Module to ensure this is clear from the outset for example aged care, sole traders, clinics, hospitals.

The inclusion of a brief explanation of how Standards are applied would assist people who are unfamiliar with Standards, or who are uncertain how this particular set of Standards might be applied, but who may wish to advocate for their health service organisation to undertake this Module.

The name of the Module should be changed to more accurately communicate the focus of the Module, for example Climate Resilient and Sustainable Healthcare Module.

A definition of what the term sustainability means in this document should be included in the explanatory note so this is clear from the outset.

The terms Sustainability and Climate Resilience/Risk are at times used interchangeably in the Module in instances where both of these terms should be included. Both sustainability and climate risk/resilience should be explicitly included where appropriate to ensure the intention of the action isn't lost.

The relationship between healthcare climate risks, adaptation and resilience, environmental sustainability and providing safe and quality healthcare, should be communicated more clearly and consistently in the explanatory note and intent. This will help people who have not previously focused on these issues understand why this Module is necessary, and why the Commission has developed the Module. For example the Intent of the Sustainable Healthcare Module could state: "Health service organisations identify, reduce, manage and improve their environmental sustainability and climate resilience to ensure continuity, safety and quality of healthcare in a climate affected world.

Ensure language used is inclusive of all health service organisations. For example consumers as opposed to patients.

Expand the glossary to include terms such as governing body, health service organisation, clinical governance system.

While it is a voluntary module, it should not be a requirement for health institutions to be assessed by independent external accrediting agencies. The potential additional resources required, and the perception of risk this may open the health services organisation up to, may be a barrier for some health institutions to choose to undertake the Module. However, health institutions should be encouraged to include the Module in their external accreditation where resources allow.

## Suggestions going forward

Making the Module voluntary initially is a useful way to gain feedback on its applicability, content and appropriateness, which can be used to update the Module as required.

Ideally, in the near future, the actions in this Module should be integrated into existing Standards, such as the NSQHS Standard. This would make assessment of these actions a mandatory element of meeting the relevant Standard.

Making the Module mandatory would ensure that health service organisations have assessed their climate risks and are taking steps to ensure that they will be able to continue providing safe and quality care in a climate affected world. This is particularly important for health service organisations whose governing bodies do not view climate and sustainability as a priority. Adequate resourcing is required for health service organisations to undertake this work.

CAHA has coordinated the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals (GGHH) network in the Pacific Region since 2012. GGHH provides resources, tools and a community of practice for advancing sustainable healthcare that should be considered when developing implementation resources.

### **Recommendations:**

**CAHA recommends that the Commission draws on existing knowledge and resources available through the Global Green and Healthy Hospitals network when developing implementation resources.**

**CAHA recommends that the Module be incorporated into existing Standards in the future to make them a necessary component of meeting these Standards.**



**For more information, please contact:**

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## Appendix: Climate and Health Alliance Members

**CAHA membership as of January 2023.**

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Abilita  
Asthma Australia  
Australasian College of Health Service Management  
Australasian College of Nutritional and Environmental Medicine  
Australasian Epidemiological Association  
Australasian Society of Lifestyle Medicine  
Australian Association of Gerontology  
Australian Association of Social Workers  
Australian Chiropractors Association  
Australian College of Nursing  
Australian Council of Social Service  
Australian Federation of Medical Women  
Australian Health Promotion Association  
Australian Healthcare and Hospitals Association  
Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association  
Australian Institute of Health Innovation  
Australian Lesbian Medical Association  
Australian Medical Students' Association  
Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (Federal)  
Australian Physiotherapy Association  
Australian Podiatry Association  
Australian Primary Health Care Nurses Association  
Australian Psychological Society  
Australian Women's Health Network  
Brooke Shelton  
Cairns Hand Clinic  
Catholic Health Australia  
Central Australia Rural Practitioners Association  
Children's Healthcare Australasia  
Climatewise Design  
Codesain  
CoHealth  
ConNetica Consulting

Consumers Health Forum of Australia  
Coota Girls Aboriginal Corporation  
CRANApplus  
Cultivate Impact  
Dietitians Australia  
Doctors for Nutrition  
Doctors Reform Society  
Enliven Victoria  
Enriching Lives Psychology  
Environmental Health Australia  
Faculty of Health, University of Technology Sydney  
Food for Thought Consulting  
Friends of CAHA  
Health Care Consumers' Association ACT  
Health Issues Centre  
Health Nature and Sustainability Research Group  
Health Services Union  
Healthy Food Systems Australia  
Healthy Futures  
Indigenous Allied Health Australia  
Institute for Sustainable Futures (UTS)  
Kooweerup Regional Health Service  
Lowitja Institute  
Mayfield Medical Connection  
Medical Association for Prevention of War Australia  
Medical Scientists Association of Victoria  
Metta Health & Psychology  
MinterEllison  
Motion Energy Group  
Mott MacDonald  
National Association of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers and Practitioners  
National Rural Health Alliance  
Naturopaths and Herbalists Association of Australia  
NSW Nurses and Midwives' Association  
Nursing and Midwifery Health Program Victoria  
Nutrition Australia  
Occupational Therapy Australia  
Optometry Australia  
OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate and Health Council  
Orygen  
Pharmacists for the Environment Australia  
Proveratis Group  
Psychology for a Safe Climate  
Public Health Association of Australia  
Pura Vida Behavioural Nutrition  
Queensland Nurses and Midwives' Union  
Rocketship Pacific

Royal Australasian College of Physicians  
The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Ophthalmologists  
Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists  
Rural Doctors Association of Victoria  
SANE Australia  
School of Public Health, University of Sydney  
School of Public Health & Social Work, Queensland University of Technology  
Second Chance Psychology  
Services for Australian Rural and Remote Allied Health  
Spelfabet  
Thoracic Society of Australia and New Zealand  
UQ Mental Health in Climate Change Transdisciplinary Research Network  
Veterinarians for Climate Action  
Victorian Allied Health Professionals Association  
Vote Earth Now  
Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research  
Weenthunga Health Network  
WHO Collaborating Centre for Environmental Health Impact Assessment  
Women's Health Goulburn North East  
Women's Health in the North  
Women's Healthcare Australasia