

Australia



KEY FACTS:

- ◆ Joined Commonwealth: 1931
- ◆ Capital: Canberra
- ◆ Population: 20,743,000 (2007)
- ◆ GDP growth: 2.5% p.a. 1990–2005
- ◆ Official language: English
- ◆ Time: GMT plus 8–11hr
- ◆ Currency: Australian dollar (A\$)

Current vulnerabilities and threats

1. What are the health risks from current or future climate change impacts that are of most concern to your country?

- ◆ Morbidity and mortality associated with more frequent and severe heat waves is likely to increase affecting children and the elderly in particular.
- ◆ Water scarcity is likely to increase and reduce food availability, particularly fresh fruit and vegetables.
- ◆ Mortality and morbidity are likely to increase due to more frequent and intense extreme weather events including bushfires, floods, storms, coastal storm surges and cyclones.
- ◆ Drought is likely to lead to an increase in mental health problems, particularly in rural communities.
- ◆ Vector-borne infectious diseases are likely to increase due to changing conditions for vectors and hosts. Geographic ranges of some diseases are likely to change putting new populations at risk.
- ◆ Morbidity and mortality from increased exposure to ground-level ozone and other air pollutants and aeroallergens such as pollens are likely to increase. People with pre-existing illness, particularly respiratory and cardiac, will be at particular risk.

2. What population groups in your country are most vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change and what are the impacts likely to be?

- ◆ There is evidence that Indigenous Australians already suffer a disproportionate health impact arising from disadvantages in living conditions and economic and social circumstances. Climate change is likely to exacerbate existing problems and introduce new challenges as described above.
- ◆ Children, the disabled and the elderly are more vulnerable to high temperatures and during emergency events.
- ◆ Lower socioeconomic groups and homeless people have less resources available to adapt to climate change (for example increased food prices) and are more likely to have living conditions that expose them to risks (for example no home or less well-constructed houses that expose people to heat or storm damage).
- ◆ People living in rural and remote areas are likely to experience greater exposure to the mental and physical effects of long term drying and drought as well as disasters such as bushfires.
- ◆ People with pre-existing medical conditions are more vulnerable to a

range of likely climate change effects including natural disasters, increased air pollution and heat waves.

- ◆ The impacts of climate change will differ between population groups and geographical locations. For example, people living in some localities may experience an increase in risk of vector-borne disease.

Strategy and policy

3. How much of a priority is addressing the impacts of climate change on health for your country?

The priority for addressing the effects of climate change on health is proportionate to the risk posed by each impact. We are currently focussing on mental health, heat and vector-borne disease.

4. Please describe the strategies your country has developed (for example health and climate change adaptation strategies) that address the health impacts of climate change.

The National Climate Change Adaptation Framework was endorsed by all levels of Australian Government (Federal, State/Territory and Local) in 2007. The Framework commits to the development of a National Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan on Human Health and other activities in the health sector. The Action Plan is currently under development.

A National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility (NCCARF) has been established. Through the NCCARF, a National Adaptation Research Plan for Human Health has been published and a National Adaptation Research Network for Human Health has been established.

The National Environmental Health Strategy 2007–2012 was approved by the Australian Health Protection Committee (AHPC) in October 2007. It provides direction for environmental health management across Australia and identifies the Australian environmental health sectors' role in developing and supporting infrastructure for health protection. The Environmental Health (enHealth) Committee of AHPC is responsible for implementing the National Environmental Health Strategy 2007–2012. Objective seven of National Environmental Health Strategy 2007–2012 stipulates that enHealth is to provide guidance on climate change adaptation approaches for environmental health issues. It specifically refers to protecting health from heat waves, developing interventions for vulnerable groups and developing resources for local governments to adapt to the human health impacts of climate change.

5. Has health been integrated into national climate change mitigation and adaptation strategies?

N/A.

6. What steps have been made towards implementation of these strategies?

Health is integrated into national climate change adaptation strategies through the work of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) including the National Climate Change Adaptation Framework which COAG endorsed in 2007.

The National Climate Change Adaptation Framework has four outcomes related to health. Indications of their progress are listed below.

- ◆ Work has begun on the development of the National Climate Change Adaptation Action Plan on Human Health.
- ◆ The federal Department of Climate Change is leading work towards establishing a national heat wave warning system.
- ◆ The National Health and Medical Research Council has included climate change in its priority funding guidelines for 2009 in order to increase research on climate change and health.
- ◆ The Sport and Recreation Ministers' Council are developing an action plan to address the impact of climate change on sporting and recreational activities.

Furthermore:

- ◆ The National Climate Change Adaptation Research Facility has been established.
- ◆ The National Adaptation Research Plan for Human Health has been signed by the Minister for Climate Change.
- ◆ The National Adaptation Research Network for Human Health has been established.

7. What are the current policy gaps in addressing climate change and health?

While the implications of climate change on health have been addressed in various policies (e.g. mental health, blood supply) there is no recent national risk assessment or overarching policy drawing these together. However, the Department of Health and Ageing previously commissioned a risk assessment which was published in 2003 as Human Health and Climate Change in Oceania: A Risk Assessment 2002.

8. How well equipped is your health system to cope with the impacts of climate change?

Some areas of the health system are relatively well prepared, for example the health system is well equipped to deal with vector-borne diseases. Other areas are under development such as heat wave warning systems.

Australia has significant ability to deal with disasters (that may be linked to climate change) including, in the health sector, a National Incident Room located at the federal Department of Health and Ageing and funding for specialised trauma centres. Some parts of the health-care system supply chain may be vulnerable due to climate change such as blood products supply for which the possible impact has not yet been determined.

9. Have you made any changes to your health system in response to increased risks resulting from climate change and if so what changes have you made?

Australia has not directly changed its healthcare system in response to

climate change. Australia does however recognise that in order to ensure a sustainable and effective healthcare system, reform is needed. Significant reforms are underway that will assist in the longer term sustainability of the healthcare system. The reforms will tackle a range of issues, including the changing health needs of the population and the potential future pressures on the healthcare system.

There are a number of mental health programmes focusing on drought affected communities in rural and remote areas. These programmes might need to include a climate change approach as part of their work and develop a health policy strategy for communities affected by prolonged drought spells.

10. What are the main constraints to addressing the health impacts of climate change in your country and how will these be addressed?

The health sector operates within financial constraints but has scope to respond to health needs as they change, for example as a result of the health effects of climate change.

The complex Australian health system is comprised of three levels of government (Federal, State/Territory, Local) and the private sector. Consequently, responsibilities for parts of the health system are shared between the levels of government. This shared responsibility can result in duplications and overlaps in policy and service delivery as well as gaps. The Council of Australian Governments (COAG) is developing and implementing reforms to address the challenges inherent in having a multilayered health system.

11. Have national resources been allocated to address climate change and health in your country? If so, approximately how much has been allocated and for what issues?

National funding was made available for the development of the National Adaptation Research Plan on Human Health and establishment of the National Adaptation Research Network for Human Health. A Human Health Cluster of the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation's Climate Adaptation Flagship has also been allocated funds (AUD\$4 million). AUD\$6 million has been allocated to the National Health and Medical Research Council for funding climate change and health research.

12. Is the Ministry of Health working together with other ministries (such as Ministries of Agriculture, Environment, Fisheries and Finance) to address health and climate change issues?

Yes, the Department is in contact with a range of other departments, particularly the Department of Climate Change.

13. Has your country been involved in work to manage climate change and health at the international level?

Yes, Australia has, among other things:

- ◆ co-sponsored a World Health Assembly (WHA) resolution in May 2008 on the topic 'Climate Change and Health';
- ◆ provided comment on a WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific document called *The Regional Framework for Action to Protect Human Health from the Effects of Climate Change in the Asia Pacific Region* in September 2008;
- ◆ contributed \$150 million over three years in funding through the Climate Change Adaptation Initiative to assist our Pacific Island neighbours and East Timor; and

- ◆ contributed \$7.5 million for the Least-Developed Countries Fund of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change.

14. How would you describe the capacity of your country to participate at the global level on climate change and health?

Australia has ongoing involvement in several prominent international agencies, such as the World Health Organization, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation and the Commonwealth. Australia is particularly active in the Western Pacific and Asian region.

Given the current funding environment Australia is unlikely to have the capacity to increase financial support at this time. However, it is able to engage and participate with information sharing activities which will continue to be informed by research and practice in a range of health sector areas.

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Relevant documents

National Climate Change Adaptation Framework
www.coag.gov.au/coag_meeting_outcomes/2007-04-13/docs/national_climate_change_adaption_framework.pdf
National Environmental Health Strategy 2007-2012
<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/ohp-environ-envstrat.htm>
Human Health and Climate Change in Oceania: A Risk Assessment 2002
http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-pubhlth-publicat-document-metadata-env_climate.htm
National Adaptation Research Plan
<http://www.nccarf.edu.au/sites/nccarf.edu.au/files/National%20Adaptat%20Research%20Plan%20-%20Human%20Health.pdf>