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**Royal Commission into National Natural  
Disaster Arrangements submission**

**April 2020**

## Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements

Thank you for the invitation to provide a written submission to the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements.

The RACP trains, educates and advocates on behalf of 17,000 physicians and 8,000 trainee physicians, across Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand. The RACP represents a broad range of medical specialities including general medicine, paediatrics and child health, cardiology, respiratory medicine, infectious diseases, neurology, oncology, public health medicine, sexual health medicine, rehabilitation medicine, geriatric medicine, and addiction medicine.

The RACP recognises the impact that climate change is already having on health and is part of a growing network of health organisations calling for action. Given the threat unchecked that climate change poses to health, climate health action is a policy and advocacy priority for the RACP.

The RACP has position statements on [Climate Change and Health](#), [Environmentally Sustainable Healthcare Position Statement](#) and the [Health Benefits Mitigating Climate Change](#). In addition, we have a [fact sheet on climate change and health](#) to highlight the human health impacts of climate change and the benefits of adaptation and mitigation.

The RACP are also collaborating with medical colleges across the sector to undertake research in relation to climate change risks to health systems and recommendations for health system mitigation and adaption.

We commend the Federal Government's Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, established in response to the extreme bushfire season of 2019-20 resulting in loss of life, property, wildlife and environmental destruction.

We note that there is no specific mention of health in the terms of reference (TOR) outlined in the [Letters Patent](#). As such we strongly recommend the importance of including the health impacts of climate change in the Royal Commission review and suggest that this is included as part of section B of the TOR as outlined below.

*b) Australia's arrangements for improving resilience and adapting to changing climatic conditions, what actions should be taken to mitigate the impacts of natural disasters, and whether accountability for natural disaster risk management, preparedness, resilience and recovery should be enhanced, including through a nationally consistent accountability and reporting framework and national standards;*

As health impacts are an integral part of any framework for a disaster management plan, it is recommended that health be included in this review and a national strategy be considered in relation to identifying and mitigating risks to health and health systems from climate change. We strongly recommend the development of a **national climate change and health strategy**. This strategy should build on frameworks developed by the health sector to coordinate action on mitigation and adaptation at all levels of Australian government. Suggested frameworks to review include:

- The Climate and Health Alliance (CAHA) [Framework for a National Strategy on Climate, Health and Well-Being for Australia](#) and;
- [The Human Health and Wellbeing Climate Change Adaption Plan for Queensland \(H-CAP\)](#)
- As a part of this preparedness, resilience and recovery there is also great scope for national consideration, research and standards in relation to occupational (professional and volunteer) and community exposures to products of combustion, heat, cold, hours of work, mental health, isolated workers, vulnerable individuals. This also includes the challenges of safety management and heroism in relation to volunteer workforces.

We recommend the advancement of comprehensive and multi-sectoral heat hazard reduction strategies to minimise heat exposure and sensitivity across Australia with particular attention to the needs of vulnerable populations:

- [The Lancet Countdown on Health and Climate Change, Policy Brief for Australia, November 2019](#) has identified that heat hazard reduction needs to be a key policy priority for the Government.
- The Policy Brief outlines that extreme heat events have killed more people in Australia than all other natural hazards combined. A 'silent killer' heat subjects the body to significant and potentially lethal stress.

We recommend the need to expedite a transition from fossil fuels to zero emission renewable energy across all economic sectors, with support to affected communities, as a high priority to reduce the impacts of climate change on health.

We recommend the need to review the short term and longer term health consequences of repeated exposure to bushfire smoke. We recognise that there is early research underway on the serious and concerning public health effects associated with prolonged exposure to bushfire smoke such as premature mortality and exacerbation of cardio-respiratory conditions. We recommend this research is further considered and reviewed.

The RACP recognises the Federal Government's leadership and the partnership approach being undertaken between health experts and the Government in respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely acknowledged that those governments around the world that have accepted and implemented the advice of health experts have responded more effectively than those which haven't within this current pandemic disaster context. The imperative for urgent action by Governments to accept the expert scientific and health advice on climate change and health is just as important.

Should you require any further information about this matter, please contact Ekta Sharma, Policy and Advocacy Officer on +61 2 9256 9679 or [Ekta.Sharma@racp.edu.au](mailto:Ekta.Sharma@racp.edu.au).