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PUBLIC HEALTH TO SUFFER FROM CLIMATE CHANGE

The Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) has highlighted the potentially devastating impacts of climate change on public health in the wake of the release of the Climate Commission's *Critical Decade* report.

"The Climate Commission's findings have been reinforced by key health experts who are predicting a range of dire consequences for public health within the foreseeable future," said Michael Moore, PHAA Chief Executive Officer (CEO).

"Public health experts such as Professor Tony McMichael, who heads the research program on climate change and health at the ANU, agree that factors directly impacting on health will include: impaired food yields and consequent malnutrition; fresh water shortages; increased incidence of infectious diseases; heightened exposures to storms, floods, heatwaves and fires; and safety risks stemming from tensions and conflicts associated with resource depletion and displaced people. Evidence indicates that some of these changes are already occurring.

"With less than 1 degree of warming globally so far, the impacts are already being felt in Australia. In the last 50 years the number of record hot days in Australia has more than doubled, with increasing risk of heatwaves and associated deaths, as well as extreme bushfire weather in South Eastern and South Western Australia.

"There is serious concern that even with concerted effort we may not be able to constrain global temperature rises this century below 3-4 degrees. To put this in context, these are temperatures that have not prevailed on earth for about 10 million years.

"Increased incidence of heatwaves in Australia alone will put those with underlying heart, blood vessel and lung diseases at considerable risk. The best available estimate of the annual worldwide number of deaths occurring because of the small amount of human-induced climate change to date is about 300,000-400,000. Most of these were children in poorer countries, dying from climate-amplified malnutrition, diarrhoeal disease, malaria and flooding.

"Assuming that Australia accounts for 1-2 per cent of the current warming, then we Aussies are causing about 5000 of those deaths each year already.

"According to the Climate Commission's report, the current decade is critical. Unless effective action is taken now, the global climate may be so irreversibly altered we will struggle to maintain our present way of life. The choices we make this decade will consequently shape the long-term climate future for our children and grandchildren. To defer action on climate change now will certainly sentence upcoming generations to a bleak future in terms of health outcomes," said Mr Moore.

For further information/comment:

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