Up to Greg Hunt to step up in French Polynesia

Health Minister Greg Hunt will join his Pacific counterparts in French Polynesia today (Monday) for a Pacific Health Ministers meeting hosted by the World Health Organisation that puts global warming and public health in the frame.

“This represents an opportunity for the Australian Government to show genuine leadership and contribute to regional expectations of a strong Pacific climate health plan and roadmap for implementation,” said Public Health Association of Australia CEO, Terry Slevin.

“The challenges of global warming on public health are not theoretical but keenly felt.”

Just days ago a coalition of health groups released a major multi-source report that shows the grim reality that global warming is making communities in the Asia-Pacific sick.

The Global Health Alliance report shows hotter temperatures are triggering a rise in new exotic and food-borne diseases, workplace absenteeism from heat-related illnesses, and increased prevalence of mental health problems, birth defects, heart disease and asthma from pollen and dust clouds.

It will cost the Australian economy and that of our neighbours billions of dollars.

The meeting in French Polynesia over four days (August 5-8) will test whether the Morrison government is listening to Australia’s near neighbours about climate health, beyond a commitment on infrastructure to head off China’s influence.

“This is a chance to really step up in the Pacific. All of Australia’s overseas aid expenditure should be considered with a ‘climate lens’, ensuring that the benefits of expenditure in climate-sensitive health risks are maximised,” Mr Slevin said.

PHAA urges the government to seize the day and generate its own climate health policy to inspire high-level strategic change. That policy should be a whole-of-government strategy that reduces and responds to the health impacts of global warming.

“This is a major problem with implications for health and wellbeing across generations, for agriculture that sustains populations and the economy. It needs all ministers and departments to develop and implement a comprehensive response,” said Mr Slevin.

“That response can’t just be about popping up after weather emergencies including bushfires and floods.”

“Every major health policy entity in this country can see the logic in and need for prevention. Yet public policy and resource investment is failing to meet that challenge.”

“A whole of government climate health policy must include more departments than health and environment. An interdepartmental approach must also include the statutory agencies the Australian
Scientists and health professionals have wrestled with this for some time, and developed with the Climate Health Alliance a National Strategy for Climate, Health and Wellbeing. With the work already done on that, the government can move forward immediately if it wants to.”

“In working with the states, the Commonwealth can provide leadership through the various COAG Councils, and include reports on progress against mitigating and adapting to the impacts of climate change as a standing item on the agenda of COAG Councils,” Mr Slevin said.

For further information/comment:
Terry Slevin, CEO of the Public Health Association Australia: 0419 901 599 tslevin@phaa.net.au
Toni Hassan (Media): 0426 207 726 thassan@phaa.net.au