Climate warming will harm health: NT health professionals want action

Health professionals and researchers have told a climate symposium in Darwin that people in the Northern Territory are at great risk of poor health because of accelerated climate change.

Alarmed at accelerating climate change, concerned health professionals came together to discuss the implications of climate warming on the health of Territorians and mitigation strategies to reduce the carbon footprint of the health sector. The event was hosted by the Public Health Association of Australia (PHAA) and Climate Action Darwin (CAD).

Symposium participants called on the NT Government and health leaders to urgently adopt adaptation strategies to prevent rising heat stress which can be fatal for the young, the sick and the elderly.

Declaring a climate emergency in Darwin is one thing but more resources are needed to focus on practical actions to reduce the vulnerability of Northern Territorians.

President of the PHAA NT, Branch Dr Suzanne Belton said, “Human health and wellbeing depends on a stable environment and climate. The environment provides us with shelter, food, water and protection, without which we die. The climate is warming. It is disrupting ecology and threatening human health. The health sector can help to address this problem in the Northern Territory.”

“As health professionals we recognise the health threats posed by climate change and we are glad to see the Australian Medical Association and the City of Darwin join over a thousand others in more than 20 countries who have declared a Climate Emergency. We also recognise that the health sector needs to take action now not to contribute to the climate risks to our patients.”

The meeting in Darwin late yesterday heard from climate experts including Dr Liz Hanna from the Australian National University, past President Climate and Health Alliance, and now Chair of the Environmental Health Working Group for the World Federation of Public Health Associations, and who convened Australia’s National Climate Change Adaptation Research Network for Human Health.

Dr Hanna said that, “ Increasing climate change trends and accelerated warming are being observed across the globe.” She described the physiology of heat stress gained from her early career as an Intensive Care Nurse and leading Australia’s heat stress research program. She warned “extra warming across the already hot and humid Top End will harm our health, our lifestyles, and limit our capacity to work.”

“The health consequences of letting global warming exceed 1.5°C are sufficiently miserable that the policy and political options are now urgently needed.”
Climate Action Co-ordinator Charlie Ward said, “Climate Action Darwin held this event with PHAA due to a lack of action from the NT Government. The Australian Medical Association has declared climate change a health emergency, the World Health Organization has called climate change the greatest health issue of the 21st century, yet the NT has no strategy to deal with the health impacts on Territorians of our rapidly changing climate”.

“Health is barely mentioned in the Northern Territory Government’s just-released Draft Climate Response. The big turnout for this event shows the depth of concern among health professionals dealing with these issues in their day-to-day work.”

Dr Mark de Souza, a senior Emergency Physician at Royal Darwin Hospital said, ”Rising temperatures in the Northern Territory will result in an increase in illness, injury and death, with greatest impact experienced by the most vulnerable members of the community and placing further demands on our already burdened hospitals.”

“Strategies to mitigate the impact of global warming on human health exist and are ideal when they adopt a cross-sectoral approach and deliberately generate co-benefits for the environment. He stressed that the operationalization of environmental stewardship within the health sector was essential for success rather than relying on the emergence of ad hoc leadership”.

Mr Arne Orstavik from the Australian Climate Youth Coalition urged health professionals to work together to reduce carbon emissions which warm the planet. He says, “Getting engaged and organising climate based social actions has shown me that being visible and vocal in showing my profound concern is personally empowering, and can change social, and policy in the area of climate sustainability.”

Ms Johanna Kieboom delivered a presentation on the Northern Territory Health Building Greenhouse Gas Emissions approved by the Department of Health, Top End Health Service, Central Australian Health Service and Department of Infrastructure Planning and Logistics.

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Presentations from the Climate Symposium in Darwin are made available on request.

PHAA is the principal non-government organisation for public health in Australia which works to promote the health and well-being of all Australians. It has 1700 individual members and represents over 40 professional groups concerned with the promotion of health at a population level and with an emphasis on prevention.

Climate Action Darwin is a local a growing community group of NT residents who acknowledge the climate emergency and are taking action. They meet monthly to plan and conduct events, education, promotion and advocacy and can be found on Facebook.