

“Climate change is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century.”¹

- Costello et al. *The Lancet* 2009

This landmark statement and article, published by the University College London’s Institute for Global Health in peak medical journal *The Lancet*, marked perhaps the strongest yet call to action on climate change from the health profession.

Key threats to global health arising from climate change include impacts on food production, water availability, heatwaves, sea-level rise and the spread of infectious diseases. Some key examples include:

- Mosquito vectors will spread to traditionally cooler regions, bringing with them diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. Some predictions estimate that around 300 million more people will be affected by malaria and *most* people will be at risk of dengue fever by 2080 due to new transmission zones².
- Rising temperatures and variable precipitation are likely to decrease the production of staple foods in many of the poorest regions – by up to 50% by 2020 in some African countries³. This will increase the prevalence of malnutrition and undernutrition, which currently cause 3.5 million deaths every year.
- Extreme high air temperatures contribute directly to deaths from cardiovascular and respiratory disease, particularly among elderly people. In the heat wave of summer 2003 in Europe for example, more than 70 000 excess deaths were recorded⁴.

The World Health Organization estimates that over 140 000 excess deaths occurred annually by the year 2004 due to the impacts of climate change, and has called on the world to take stronger and immediate action on climate change.

Who are Doctors for the Environment Australia (DEA)?

DEA is a national voluntary organisation that aims to utilise the skills of members of the medical profession to address the ill health resulting from damage to the natural environment at local, national and global levels.

The medical profession has a proud record of service to the community not only through personal clinical care, but also involvement in global issues that threaten the future of humanity. A key part of DEA’s current work is educating the health profession, the public and governments about the dangerous health impacts of climate change.

DEA is chaired by Prof Michael Kidd AM, and includes on its scientific committee Nobel Prize-winner Prof Peter Doherty AC, Sir Gustav Nossal AC and 2003 Australian of the Year Prof Fiona Stanley AC. DEA is a branch of the International Society of Doctors for the Environment, based in Switzerland and with branches in over 35 countries worldwide.

References

¹ Costello et al. (2009) “Managing the health effects of climate change”, *The Lancet*, Vol 373, May 16, 2009

² Hales S et al. Potential effect of population and climate changes on global distribution of dengue fever: an empirical model. *The Lancet*, 2002, 360:830–834.

³ *Climate change 2007. Impacts, adaptation and vulnerability*. Geneva, Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007 (Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change).

⁴ Robine JM et al. Death toll exceeded 70,000 in Europe during the summer of 2003. *Les Comptes Rendus/Série Biologies*, 2008, 331:171–78.

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