

## Australian Medical Association declares climate change a health emergency

**Exclusive: AMA points to ‘clear scientific evidence indicating severe impacts for our patients and communities’**

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Tue 3 Sep 2019 04.00 AEST Last modified on Tue 3 Sep 2019 04.15 AEST



AMA president Tony Bartone says climate change will affect health by increasing the spread of infectious diseases and through more extreme weather. Photograph: Mick Tsikas/AAP

The Australian Medical Association has formally declared climate change a health emergency, pointing to “clear scientific evidence indicating severe impacts for our patients and communities now and into the future”.

The AMA’s landmark shift, delivered by a motion of the body’s federal council, brings the organisation into line with forward-leaning [positions taken by the American Medical Association](#), the British Medical Association and Doctors for the Environment Australia.

The American Medical Association and the American College of Physicians recognised climate change as a health emergency in June 2019, and the British Medical Association the following month declared a climate emergency and committed to campaign for carbon neutrality by 2030.

The World Health Organisation [has recognised since 2015](#) that climate change is the greatest threat to global health in the 21st century, and argued the scientific evidence for that assessment is “overwhelming”.

The AMA has recognised the health risks of climate change since 2004. Having now formally recognised that climate change is a health emergency, the peak organisation representing doctors in Australia is calling on the Morrison government to promote an active transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy; adopt mitigation targets within an Australian carbon budget; promote the health benefits of addressing climate change; and develop a national strategy for health and climate change.

The AMA president, Tony Bartone, argues the scientific evidence is clear. “There is no doubt that climate change is a health emergency. The AMA accepts the scientific evidence on climate change and its impact on human health and human wellbeing,” he says.

Bartone says the climate science suggests warming will affect human health and wellbeing “by increasing the environment and situations in which infectious diseases can be transmitted, and through more extreme weather events, particularly heatwaves”.

“Climate change will cause higher mortality and morbidity from heat stress,” the AMA president says. “Climate change will cause injury and mortality from increasingly severe weather events. Climate change will cause increases in the transmission of vector-borne diseases. Climate change will cause food insecurity resulting from declines in agricultural outputs. [Climate change](#) will cause a higher incidence of mental ill-health.

“These effects are already being observed internationally and in Australia.”

Bartone told Guardian Australia the motion adopted by the federal council had followed an ongoing discussion among stakeholders, and medical practitioners within the AMA membership.

Health and medical groups, including Doctors for the Environment, the Climate and Health Alliance, the Royal Australian College of Physicians, and the Australian Medical Students’ Association wrote [an open letter to all political parties in April](#) pointing out the “significant and profound impacts climate change has on the health of people and our health system”.

The AMA president said the decision to pass the motion followed on from those events both domestically and internationally, and was “pretty much unanimous” internally. “I don’t recall anyone speaking against it,” he said.

Asked whether the current government was pursuing ambitious enough policy action to combat the risks of climate change, [which the Morrison government argues it is](#), Bartone said “it’s really difficult to say because this issue is clouded in conjecture and conflicting reports”.

He said all of the political groups in the Australian parliament had a responsibility to move past the toxic partisan politics that had characterised the debate and find durable solutions to a difficult public policy challenge.

Bartone said the AMA would continue to assess the evidence about climate change as it emerged and update its stance to reflect the science.

The [latest official data released last week](#) confirms that greenhouse gas emissions continue to rise in Australia. National emissions increased by 3.1m tonnes in the year to March to reach 538.9m tonnes, a 0.6% jump on the previous year.

Emissions in Australia have increased every year since the Abbott government repealed a national carbon price after taking office in 2013.