

Denials Down Under: Climate Change and Health in Australia

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Theme: [Environment](#)

Richard Horton's [note](#) in an October 2015 issue of *The Lancet* was cautiously optimistic. It described the launch of **Doctors for Climate Change Action**, led by the **Royal Australasian College of Physicians (RACP)** in the lead-up to the UN Climate Change Conference COP21. The initiative had arisen from a statement endorsed by a range of medical and international health organisations (some 69 in all), specifically emphasising that ancient obligation for a doctor to protect the health of patients and their communities. But, as if to add a more cautionary tale of improvement, the 2015 Lancet Commission also concluded that the response to climate change would, in all likelihood, be “the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century”.

A more sombre note tends to prevail in such assessments. The RACP has itself made the [observation](#) that,

“Unchecked, climate change threatens to worsen food and water shortages, change the risk of climate-sensitive diseases, and increase the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events. This is likely to have serious consequences for public health and wellbeing.”

In recent years, the link to a rise in temperatures has been associated with specific medical events, such as the transmission of infectious diseases. [The Lancet](#) notes one example specific to mosquitoes and their increasingly energised role:

“Vectorial capacity of *Aedes aegypti* and *Aedes albopictus* has increased since 1990, with tangible effects – notably the doubling of cases of dengue fever every decade since 1990.”

Mona Sarfarty, director of the Medical Society Consortium on Climate and Health, could only be gloomy at this month’s International Panel on Climate Change [report](#), releasing a [statement](#) rich with claims.

“As a physician, I know that climate change is already harming the health of Americans. Doctors and medical professionals see it daily in our offices, including the effects of extreme weather events like Hurricane Florence to droughts, smoke from large wildfires, spreading Lyme disease, and worsened asthma.”

What, then, to be done? The RACP’s November 2016 [position statement](#) outlines a set of

canonical objectives still deemed profane by climate change sceptics, notably those coal deep: a decrease in fossil fuel combustion in the generating of energy and transport; a reduction of fossil fuel extraction; decreasing emissions from food production and agriculture; and the improvement of emergency efficiency in homes and buildings. Not exactly scurrilous stuff, but highly offensive to fossil fuel fiends.

The Morrison Government, hived off from such concerns, is more focused on immediate, existential goals. Its own electoral survival, shakily built on the reduction of energy costs to pacify a disgruntled electorate, has featured a degree of bullying on the part of the prime minister towards energy companies. Energy retailers, Morrison [warns](#), must drastically reduce prices from January 1 or face the intrusive burdens of regulation. The considerations of the planet, and the health of its inhabitants, have been put aside, a point made clear in the Australian government's response to the IPCC findings.

The note of the report is one of manageable mitigation, shot through with a measured fatalism: "Limiting global warming to 1.5°C would require rapid, far-reaching and unprecedented changes in all aspects of society". While [admitting](#) that, "Some impacts may be long-lasting and irreversible, such as the loss of some ecosystems (*high confidence*)" stabilising temperatures at 1.5°C would at least draw a ring around the catastrophe.

"The avoided climate change impacts on sustainable development, eradication of poverty and reducing inequalities would be greater if global warming were limited to 1.5°C rather than 2°C, if mitigation and adaptation synergies were maximised while trade-offs are minimised (high confidence)."

For the Morrison government, these words, admittedly technical and dry, are the stuff another galaxy, pressed to the outer reaches of the cosmos. The IPCC report did not, [according](#) to the prime minister, "provide recommendations to Australia", leaving his government to pursue policies to "ensure electricity prices are lower".

Fossil fuel lobbyists and advocates were comforted by this retreat from environmental reality.

"There is a role," [insisted](#) former Coalition energy minister and Queensland Resources Council chief **Ian Macfarlane**, "for high-quality Australian coal and it's compatible with meeting Paris emissions reduction targets."

An interesting omission on emissions here is that the richer the quality of coal, the more concentrated the carbon. Poorer quality brown coal, curiously enough, is less of a culprit. But Macfarlane wants it both ways, if not all ways. "Our economy depends on the coal industry, and we can have both a strong coal industry and reduce carbon emissions."

Such dismissive, a deluding behaviour, has been seen to be nothing short of "contemptuous" by a group of Australian health experts, whose Thursday [letter](#) in *The Lancet* suggests a disregard for "any duty of care regarding the future wellbeing of Australians and our immediate neighbours".

The signatories, including Nobel Laureates **Peter Doherty** and **Tilman Ruff**, suggested that, like "other established historical harms to human health [such as tobacco], narrow

vested interests must be countered to bring about fundamental change in the consumption of coal and other fossil fuels.” They urge the adoption of a “call to action”, including the phasing out of existing coal-fired power stations, a “commitment to no new or expanded coal mines and no new coal-fired power stations” and the removal of “all subsidies to fossil fuel industries”.

A damp lettuce response came from the near invisible federal environment minister, **Melissa Price**, who insists that the Morrison government remains aware of the IPCC findings. This same minister, when asked about what she is doing in her portfolio, persists in [praising](#) the blessings of the good divinity that is coal, a spectacle as curious as a wolf at a sheep convention. “We have consistently stated that the IPCC is a trusted source of scientific advice that we will continue to take into account on climate policy.” To account, it would seem, is to ignore; to acknowledge is to dismiss.

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