

A Threat to our Nation's Health.

An appeal to the New Zealand government to take action against climate change.  
Submission from the Auckland University Medical Students Association (AUMSA).

This year is set to be another year of record global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions, a trend that has continued since the climate change performance index began in 2005 (1). Furthermore the global atmospheric carbon dioxide concentration exceeded the 400ppm threshold in March of this year, according to the US department of commerce national oceanic and atmospheric administration (2). This level demonstrates the effects of human fossil fuel usage since the pre-industrial era, when carbon dioxide concentration was 120ppm lower than current measurements.

It is widely accepted that elevated carbon dioxide levels, along with other greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, are a major contributor to the increasing global temperatures, rising sea levels, acidification of oceans, retreating ice sheets and extreme weather events (3) that continue to effect our planet with increasing intensity and frequency.

This has huge implications to our nation's ecological systems and future health. The worsening of these environmental parameters may lead to substantial increases in climate change related diseases such as the transmission of diarrheal illnesses, vector-borne and infectious diseases e.g. malaria, dengue fever, cardiovascular and respiratory illnesses, injury and illness from extreme weather events, heat/UV radiation related deaths and illnesses, malnutrition, allergic diseases e.g. asthma and many more listed in Bennet and Kim's papers (4,5). Climate change also has the potential to result in indirect deleterious effects including mental health problems due to stress, loss of homes, economic instability, as well as forced migration. With children, the elderly, and communities living in poverty being the most vulnerable to these impacts, widening any preexisting inequalities (4,5).

Having cross-party agreements and policies makes the issue of climate change less politicised and ensures a consistent effort into addressing climate change even as governments change.

We believe a climate change law such as the UK Climate Change Act will be beneficial by setting up an Independent Climate Commission. They will act as an authoritative, independent voice in the debate and will hold the government accountable in terms of taking action and setting fair goals. (6)

Importantly, although the submission is for post-2020 targets, it is important to take action now. The world has five times the amount of fossil fuels in reserve as we can afford to burn. We need to immediately commit to zero new fossil fuel exploration and phase out existing extraction in the next decade. We also need to be consistent in our approach and decrease and phase out subsidisation of fossil fuels as soon as possible. Financial subsidies that encourage the production and consumption of fossil fuels are a major barrier to global efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. (7)

For these reasons AUMSA is in full support of OraTaiao NZ climate change and health council (7), which urges the NZ government to take action by the following means:

- (i) call for a global zero carbon target by 2050 – and the same NZ target before 2050
- (ii) pledge at least 40% cuts by 2030 in our gross domestic greenhouse gas emissions compared with 1990, towards at least 95% by 2050
- (iii) place an immediate moratorium on new fossil fuel exploration, phasing out existing extraction in the next decade
- (iv) include in the INDC, both cross-party agreement and policies to achieve these targets

AUMSA has an interest in preserving and improving the health of New Zealand, as many of its members will go on to work and serve in our communities, that are under the threat of climate change and its effects on health. Please take our appeal seriously. The health of New Zealand is at stake.

#### References:

1. The Climate Change Performance Index. Results 2015. Jan Burck, Franziska Marten, Christoph Bals
2. <http://research.noaa.gov/News/NewsArchive/LatestNews/TabId/684/ArtMID/1768/ArticleID/11153/Greenhouse-gas-benchmark-reached-.aspx>
3. <http://climate.nasa.gov/evidence/>
4. A review of the consequences of global climate change on human health. Kim, Ki-Hyun; Kabir, Ehsanul; Ara Jahan, Shamin. Journal of Environmental Science & Health Part C Environmental Carcinogenesis & Ecotoxicology Reviews. 32(3):299-318, 2014.
5. Health and equity impacts of climate change in Aotearoa-New Zealand, and health gains from climate action. Hayley Bennett, Rhys Jones, Gay Keating, Alistair Woodward, Simon Hales, Scott Metcalfe. The New Zealand Medical Journal. 28th November 2014, Volume 127 Number 1406.
6. <http://fixourfuture.nz/>
7. <http://www.orataiao.org.nz>