



NATIONAL RURAL
HEALTH
ALLIANCE INC.

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Working on links between climate change and health

Last year's Garnaut review on climate change made two things clear – that Australia has both a high level of exposure and sensitivity to the impacts of global warming, and a high level of capacity to plan and respond to the impacts it might bring.

Australia's health sector is leading the way in some of these important areas and updates on progress will be provided at the 10th National Rural Health Conference in Cairns from 17-20 May.

Gordon Gregory, Executive Director of the National Rural Health Alliance, which is organising the biennial event, says because Australia has a fragile ecology many businesses and communities will face significant adjustments from changes in the patterns of weather and natural disasters.

“Biodiversity on land, in rivers and wetlands, coastal estuaries and deep oceans is under threat,” he said. “But Australia also has a high level of capacity to plan and respond to the impacts of climate change. Because of its great size and the wealth of its human and natural resources, with appropriate adjustments Australia can be a leader among those nations able to benefit from new opportunities created by climate change.”

Mr Gregory said there is a close relationship between the economic health of country communities and the physical and mental health and wellbeing of the people who live there.

“Australian scientists are playing a key role in studying the direct impacts of climate change on health, and the adaptive strategies that exist. Among other things, these studies focus on how climate change is likely to affect the distribution of infectious disease, and the food and energy systems,” he said.

At the Cairns conference a group of researchers led by Brian Kelly, Helen Berry and Craig Hart will describe some of the latest evidence on the impact of drought on mental health. The Government's national review of drought policy included the findings of an expert panel on the social impacts. In releasing that report the Minister for Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, Tony Burke, confirmed that the Commonwealth is committed to helping farmers plan for the future and better prepare for climate change as part of work to build a strong future for rural Australia.

Liz Hanna, from the climate change and health team at the Australian National University, will speak on Sunday 17 May, and in a workshop on Tuesday 19 May, on the human, economic and demographic impacts of climate change in Australia over the coming years.

Erica Bell will discuss the competencies that the world's rural and remote general practitioners will need in a climate-changing world and how their education and training should be adapted to suit.

The Australian Conservation Foundation's Paul Sinclair will emphasise the urgent need to build Australia's social and ecological resilience to global warming. He will argue that the loss of native species and ecosystem degradation are inextricably linked to human health and wellbeing. He will make the case for remedial action to address the degradation of Australian ecosystems, reduce greenhouse gas emissions and increase the capacity of people to care for their country.

The health sector and the individuals in it also have key roles to play in the nation's capacity to plan and respond to the impacts of climate change. One of the leading organisations in this respect is Doctors for the Environment, Australia (DEA), chaired by Michael Kidd and with members in all States and Territories. DEA's current priority focus is on the health effects of climate change.

Graeme Horton, joint author with Tony McMichael of the DEA's *Climate change health check*, released in 2008 for World Health Day, will lead a workshop in Cairns on the role of the health sector in mitigating the effects of climate change. Grant Blashki and Nick Towle will join with Graeme in outlining how health care can be provided in ways to reduce its environmental impact through such things as 'green clinics', 'green cities' and patient education. They will also outline the place of health professionals' advocacy on these issues.

The conference will result in recommendations on the links between climate change and health. Senator Jan McLucas, Parliamentary Secretary for Health, will represent the Government at the closing session, at which time conference recommendations will be finalised.

Conference registration details and the latest program are available at www.ruralhealth.org.au

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