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Our Ref: KM21-151

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Climate Change Commissioner  
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via email: [hello@climatecommission.govt.nz](mailto:hello@climatecommission.govt.nz)

Tēnā koe Dr Carr,

### **Climate Action for Aotearoa**

Thank you for giving The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners the opportunity to comment on the Climate Change Commission's first package of advice to government to help Aotearoa transition to a thriving, climate-resilient and low emissions future.

The Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners is the largest medical college in New Zealand. Our membership of 5,500 general practitioners comprises almost 40 percent of New Zealand's specialist medical workforce. Our kaupapa is to set and maintain education and quality standards for general practice, and to support our members to provide competent and equitable patient care.

### **Submission**

The College congratulates the Climate Change Commission on the release of this draft advice to government. Clearly there has been considerable thought and analysis devoted to the production of this important advice.

However, the College considers that the advice should place more emphasis on climate change as a health issue, and on the co-benefits for health of responses to climate change.

#### Climate change is a health issue

Dr Margaret Chan, the former WHO Director-General recently stated that “achieving net zero emissions is the most important global health intervention now and for decades to come,” and that the “health benefits will outweigh the costs of mitigation policies, even without considering the longer-term health and economic benefits of avoiding more severe climate change.”<sup>1</sup>

Her statements are echoed closer to home by the Royal Society in their 2017 report “Human Health Impacts of Climate Change for New Zealand.”

“Climate change is affecting New Zealand and the health of New Zealanders as many factors that contribute to our health and well-being are threatened by climate change. Over time, increasing climate change will lead to our health being impacted more severely, and more of us will be affected.

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<sup>1</sup> Chan Fung Fu-Chun, M. (2021) Accelerating towards net zero emissions: the most important global health intervention. *The Lancet Planetary Health*. 5 (2), e64-e65.  
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196\(20\)30296-5/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanplh/article/PIIS2542-5196(20)30296-5/fulltext) accessed 26/3/21

Direct effects from climate change include increased exposure to heat waves and weather events, flooding and fires.

Indirect environmental effects from climate change include increased exposure to microbial contamination, pollen, particulate air pollutants and carriers of new diseases.

Indirect social effects from climate change include disruption to health services, social and economic factors including migration, housing and livelihood stresses, food security, socioeconomic deprivation and health inequality.

The consequences of climate change are also expected to have adverse mental health and community health effects.

The effects of climate change will not be spread evenly across the population, exacerbating existing socioeconomic and ethnic health inequalities.”<sup>2</sup>

Climate change mediated effects on mental health are likely to be a particular problem among residents of rural areas<sup>3</sup> and among those with pre-existing psychiatric disorders and medical conditions.<sup>4</sup>

The College is very concerned at the potential for climate change to exacerbate existing health inequities as a result of effects on the determinants of health.<sup>5</sup>

There are important co-benefits for health of responses to climate change

Royal Society report “Human Health Impacts of Climate Change for New Zealand states;

“Well-designed policies to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions will not only limit climate change and reduce the associated risks to human health, but have the potential to improve population health and reduce health inequalities.”<sup>2</sup>

The College considers that this potential to improve population health and reduce health inequity is currently underemphasised in the advice. For example, there is little mention of the potential role of changes in diet in both limiting climate change and in improving health.

In their report Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems: Food Planet Health the EAT-Lancet Commission on Food, Planet, Health state;

“Food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on Earth.”

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.royalsociety.org.nz/assets/documents/Report-Human-Health-Impacts-of-Climate-Change-for-New-Zealand-Oct-2017.pdf> accessed 26/3/21

<sup>3</sup> Berry H, Kelly B, Hanigan I, Coates J, McMichael A, Welsh J, Kjellstrom T. Rural mental health impacts of climate change. Garnaut Climate Change Review; 2008  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237417987\\_Rural\\_mental\\_health\\_impacts\\_of\\_climate\\_change](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/237417987_Rural_mental_health_impacts_of_climate_change) Accessed 26/3/21

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ranzcp.org/news-policy/policy-and-advocacy/position-statements/addressing-mental-health-impacts-natural-disasters> accessed 26/3/21

<sup>5</sup> Bennett H et al. Health and equity impacts of climate change in Aotearoa New Zealand, and health gains from climate action NZMJ 28 November 2014, Vol 127 No 1406; ISSN 1175-8716 [https://assets-global.website-files.com/5e332a62c703f653182faf47/5e332a62c703f6c2ab2fd6e9\\_content.pdf](https://assets-global.website-files.com/5e332a62c703f653182faf47/5e332a62c703f6c2ab2fd6e9_content.pdf) accessed 26/3/21

“A large body of work has emerged on the environmental impacts of various diets, with most studies concluding that a diet rich in plant-based foods and with fewer animal source foods confers both improved health and environmental benefits.”

Overall, the literature indicates that such diets are “win-win” in that they are good for both people and planet.”<sup>6</sup>

New Zealand research concluded that;

“Guideline-abiding dietary scenarios, particularly those that prioritize plant-based foods, have the potential to confer substantial climate and health gains. This research shows that major contextual differences specific to New Zealand’s food system do not appear to cause notable deviation from global trends, reinforcing recent international research highlighting the climate and health co-benefit opportunity inherent in widespread uptake of plant-based diets.”<sup>7</sup>

In the light of the integral relationship between climate change and health the College considers that the Climate Commission requires stronger health expertise than it has currently. The College supports the call from OraTaiao: NZ Climate & Health Council, urging Hon James Shaw, Minister for Climate Change to appoint public health experts to the Climate Change Commission and to advise the commission to establish a health technical working group.<sup>8</sup>

#### Conclusion

The College looks forward to the response to the call for greater Health expertise in the Commission and wishes the Commission well in obtaining political and popular support for the essential changes required to address climate change.

We hope you find our submission helpful. If you have any questions, or would like more information, please email us at [policy@rnzcgp.org.nz](mailto:policy@rnzcgp.org.nz)

Nāku noa, nā



Kylie McQuellin  
Head of Membership Services

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<sup>6</sup> [https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet\\_Commission\\_Summary\\_Report.pdf](https://eatforum.org/content/uploads/2019/07/EAT-Lancet_Commission_Summary_Report.pdf) accessed 26/3/21

<sup>7</sup> Drew J, et al Healthy and Climate-Friendly Eating Patterns in the New Zealand Context  
<https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/pdf/10.1289/EHP5996> accessed 26/3/21

<sup>8</sup> [https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/orataiao/pages/632/attachments/original/1616575494/Letter\\_from\\_health\\_professional\\_organisations\\_to\\_Hon\\_James\\_Shaw.pdf?1616575494](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/orataiao/pages/632/attachments/original/1616575494/Letter_from_health_professional_organisations_to_Hon_James_Shaw.pdf?1616575494) accessed 26/3/21