

Doctors will confront health effects of climate change in the future

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It usually falls to scientists to talk about the urgency of the need to combat climate change, but Dr Ingo Weber is among a growing number of medicos who believe that doctors should also take a leading role.

A Flinders medical graduate and practising anaesthetist, Dr Weber teaches [medical students](#) from Flinders and Adelaide universities about health and [climate change](#) as part of the topic *Health Professionals and Society*.

Dr Weber, who in addition to practising full-time in Australia and Europe has had a long involvement in doctor and medical student education, says that in view of the disastrous implications of global warming for human health, educating medical students about climate change is crucial.

"They will be the future doctors who have to deal with its massive health impacts," Dr Weber said.

"Our health services and infrastructure are not prepared for the health impacts we are going to be facing in Australia."

As well as discussing the issue globally, the topic, which he teaches with his colleague Associate Professor Hubertus Jersmann,, covers the health effects linked to climbing temperatures and rising sea levels on Australia, and on Adelaide specifically. With the CSIRO predicting just over a five-degree rise in temperatures by the end of the century,

Adelaide is set to become "quite a hot place", Dr Weber said.

"That means a lot of people will be suffering from heat effects in many different ways, and doctors and other [health professionals](#) need to be prepared for that," he said.

"It's the young and the elderly who will be most affected. With our ageing population demanding more [health services](#) anyway, on top of that we are going to have these extremes of weather to contend with, placing a major strain on our health and hospital systems."

He said Indigenous populations in rural areas will be particularly vulnerable.

"People who already have a lot of co-morbidities or other illnesses to contend with, be it renal failure, heart disease or diabetes, along with the elderly and the very young, will be the most affected," Dr Weber said.

"Climate change is biting already – in the last 15 years we've had 10 of the hottest years ever recorded."

Dr Weber said that while climate change knows no borders, in proportional terms Australia is likely to feel the changes severely. He said the recent drought and its effect on the Murray Darling Basin has offered a taste of what it to come, particularly in its implications for mental health.

"The people who are going to be physically and psychological affected by more severe weather and droughts are our farmers, the people who supply our bread and butter and are already doing it tough,

Dr Weber said the increase of [mental health problems](#) including depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder and suicide in times

of drought is already recognised. Increasingly frequent and more severe and extreme weather conditions, brought about by [global warming](#) will act as a threat multiplier, he said.

"This is going to take a heavy toll on farmers in particular, who are already having a tough time."

On a global scale it is the poorest populations of developing countries, which already struggle to achieve basic levels of health and have least contributed to climate change who are going to be especially vulnerable to climate change and suffer most from the health impacts.

"We are at risk of reversing the all the good work we have done in reducing paediatric and maternal mortality and morbidity rates," Dr Weber said,

Dr Weber said doctors and health professionals have a duty to communicate the urgency of the threats to health and to life.

"It's not just a case of telling the students that they will have a few more patients with heat stress: I am pointing the finger directly at them to say that as doctors and medical students we have a duty to act as health advocates. Our society expects us to have a role in protecting their [health](#), not just in treating our patients in our clinical practice."

"Our responsibility changes in the face of an urgent threat, when we become responsible not for just one life, but for millions of lives."

Dr Weber said that at the time he graduated from Flinders in 1992, atmospheric CO₂ levels had already reached 350 parts per million, which is considered to be the limit to a safe climate. It was also the year the UN declared man-made climate change a threat to humanity.

"We are now heading towards 450 parts per million. Beyond this will be catastrophic, irreversible climate change and the threatened collapse of most human civilisation as we know it," he said.

"By the time today's medical students become specialist doctors there will be little they can do, since within 10 years a far hotter climate will be locked in. This why we want to highlight the urgency and importance of the issue to our medical students today.

"I think there is no better place to start than at my own university, which taught me everything I needed to know to become a doctor. "

Provided by Flinders University

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