

Australia is not prepared for climate change health impacts

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A new report in the *Medical Journal of Australia* on the country's climate change mitigation and adaptation activities is out today.

Despite decades of warning from scientists, Australia remains woefully underprepared to deal with hotter, more frequent and longer heatwaves, catastrophic bushfires, [severe storms](#) and intense prolonged droughts, and higher risk of mosquito-borne diseases that climate change brings.

These and other [climate impacts](#) are considered in Australia's first-ever report to the UK medical journal *The Lancet's* annual Countdown on Health and Climate Change, published today in the *Medical Journal of Australia*, which tracks global mitigation and adaptation efforts.

QUT's Professor Hilary Bambrick is one of the researchers to co-author the Australian report.

"The key finding is that Australia remains ill-prepared for the [health](#) impacts that come with increasing temperatures and extreme weather," said Professor Bambrick, head of the QUT School of Public Health and Social Work.

"We are lagging well behind other countries in our response to climate change.

The report's release coincides with a week of [extreme weather](#) in eastern Australia, with unprecedented dangerous bushfires in Queensland and severe storms and flooding in the Sydney region.

Professor Bambrick looked at health adaptation planning by all levels of government in Australia, regional migration and population displacement, media reporting trends and climate sensitive diseases.

"Of all the states and territories, the ACT and Queensland are the only ones with anything approaching a comprehensive health adaptation plan," she said.

"At local government level, each of the eight capital cities have conducted climate change risk assessments or adaptation plans but only three of them included health services.

"Even then, the most well-developed health plans focus only on heatwaves, and include impacts on emergency service responders from extra call-outs and support for vulnerable people.

"The plans don't consider how we build our long-term resilience and improve our capacity to cope with other extreme events such as severe storms, catastrophic bushfires, and flooding, or with less acute events such as mosquito-borne disease outbreaks or psychological distress in drought affected areas."

Professor Bambrick said climate change would drive migration and put extra pressure on under-prepared health systems.

"Tasmania may have to brace itself as increasing numbers of Australians head south to avoid extreme heat," she said.

"Regionally, Australia could increasingly see itself as a destination country for people from low-lying Pacific Islands as sea-level rise means significant loss of land.

"Some low-lying Pacific island countries are already planning to move some or all of their population, having purchased land in other countries."

"Australia's policy inaction is short-sighted. For example, we have major water shortages in the Murray-Darling Basin and 100 per cent of NSW in drought, yet the Federal Government is still only talking short-term drought assistance and is not considering what's actually behind the severity of the drought."

Professor Bambrick also tracked media reporting on health and climate change from 2008 to 2017 for the report.

"As taking action on climate change to protect health has become ever more urgent, Australian media coverage of the issue has halved over the past decade.

"This is despite strong public desire to do something meaningful about climate change.

"While Australia needs to do much more to limit [climate change](#), we also have to manage the impacts that we're already seeing to avoid the worst health consequences. This report sets the baseline by which we can see how we're tracking on this over coming years.

"This report is timely because Australia is heading into international [climate](#) negotiations at the UN Climate Change Summit in Poland next week where governments will decide how to implement the 2015 Paris agreement to limit global warming to under two degrees, with an aspirational target of not going above 1.5 degrees."

More information: The MJA–Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: Australian policy inaction threatens lives. *Med J Aust*. [DOI: 10.5694/mja18.00789](https://doi.org/10.5694/mja18.00789)

Nick Watts et al. The 2018 report of the Lancet Countdown on health and climate change: shaping the health of nations for centuries to come, *The Lancet* (2018). [DOI: 10.1016/S0140-6736\(18\)32594-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(18)32594-7)

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