

OraTaiao Media Release – 13 December 2010

Cancun a step in the right direction but a missed opportunity to make New Zealanders healthier

Although the agreement reached at Cancun has succeeded in keeping global climate talks alive, it has not done so well for the future health of New Zealanders or the planet, say senior doctors.

The New Zealand government is hailing Cancun as a major step forward but it still falls far short of the action need to avert dangerous climate change.

“Much greater progress is still needed to reduce emissions and protect the world from the major risks that climate change poses for health and human survival,” says Dr Alex Macmillan, spokesperson for OraTaiao: NZ Climate & Health.

“While even a two degree global temperature increase is likely to carry significant risks, under the Cancun Agreement we could still see a four degree rise, which would push us past catastrophic global tipping points.”

According to Dr Macmillan we not only need a much greater reduction in emissions than has been pressed for by our government, but there are multiple opportunities to both improve our health as a nation and reduce our carbon footprints. The government could act on these opportunities immediately.

“Policies for healthier transport, healthier homes and a low-carbon health sector make sense both for our economy and for our health and wellbeing, as identified by a series of documents released recently by the World Health Organisation, entitled ‘Health in the Green Economy,’” she says.

“For example, investing in better infrastructure for walking, cycling and public transport, along with better urban planning, would lead to healthier, more attractive and active communities, and would save lives.

“The government’s continued insistence on large-scale spending on massive road-building projects is a recipe for more deaths from pollution, obesity-related diseases and road crashes.

“New Zealand is in a good position to turn the prospect of high emissions bills into emissions credits through a healthy and prosperous transition to a low-carbon economy. But we need emissions targets, funding and regulations that work together to grow a healthier New Zealand in a healthier and fairer world.”

OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate & Health

www.orataiao.org.nz

Media liaison – Dr Alexandra Macmillan, 021 167 7095, a.macmillan@auckland.ac.nz

Other contacts

Dr George Laking, Spokesperson, 021 983 919

Dr Scott Metcalfe, Co-convenor, 021 2010 440

Background notes

Dr George Laking, MD PhD FRACP (Te Whakatohea) is a medical oncologist and health economist based in Auckland.

Leading medical bodies throughout the world are saying that politicians must heed health effects of climate change, doctors must speak out, and doctors demand their politicians be decisive, listen to the clear facts and act now. OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate and Health is part of this international movement, and consists of more than a hundred senior doctors and other health professionals concerned about climate change impacts on health and health services.

The incorporated society has published a number of articles about climate change and health in peer-reviewed medical journals, which can be found on its website www.orataiao.org.nz. OraTaiao's messages include:

- Climate change is a real and urgent threat to the health and wellbeing of New Zealanders.
- New Zealand must be an active partner in global cooperation to reduce atmospheric greenhouse gas emissions to 350ppm CO₂-equivalents by:
 - rapidly halving our own emissions by 2020¹
 - paying our fair share of international investment in a global future.
- New Zealand can, and must, respond to climate change in ways that improve population health, accord with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, create a more equitable, just and resilient society, and promote a healthier economy within ecological resource limits.

Responses to climate change can actually help with other goals, including healthier people, a more equal society and a healthier economy. For example, more active travel would reverse and reduce the obesity, heart disease and type 2 diabetes epidemics, road traffic crashes, and urban air pollution, and improve mental health. Economic benefits include reduced health spending, less reliance on imported fossil fuels, and greater productivity through a healthier workforce and reduced urban congestion.

¹ Metcalfe S, Woodward A, Macmillan A, et al; for the New Zealand Climate and Health group. Why New Zealand must rapidly halve its greenhouse gas emissions [Special Article]. *NZ Med J.* 2009;122(1304):72–95. www.nzma.org.nz/journal/122-1304/3827/