

Public Health Association Media release

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Government not tackling climate change management says Māori academic

The Public Health Association (PHA) annual conference at Lincoln University was told today that developing strategies to manage climate change is one of the most critical issues faced by New Zealand's public health professionals.

"Climate change is the defining public health issue of the 21st century," Dr Rhys Jones (Ngati Kahungunu) from the University of Auckland said.

"Global climate change threatens the very foundations of health for human populations. Our health and wellbeing depends on having stable social, cultural and economic conditions, and sustainable natural ecosystems. Climate change will have major adverse effects on all these things."

He said examples include unprecedented spread of infectious diseases, a dramatic reduction in global food production, and more natural disasters.

"It's real and it's happening. Globally, we are already experiencing more frequent and severe weather events, including extremes of hot and cold, floods and droughts. The effects will become much more serious as the temperature increases."

Dr Jones stressed that action to prevent the worst effects of climate change is urgently required.

"We know exactly what is required to avoid these catastrophic outcomes – we need to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions dramatically and quickly. The longer we leave it the more difficult it will be to stay within safe thresholds."

Public health professionals have expressed frustration that this critical action is being obstructed by vested interests.

"One of the major problems is that, despite overwhelming scientific consensus, many New Zealanders remain unconvinced about the threat of climate change and the need to act urgently. This is largely due to a formidable public disinformation campaign that seeks to foster doubt in the public mind. Our government therefore lacks the mandate from its citizens to take necessary action.

"As a result, instead of promoting active transport and moving to renewable energy sources, our government is investing heavily in major motorway projects and supporting proposals to extract lignite. These actions encourage increased emissions, the direct opposite of what we know we should be doing."

Dr Jones argues that public health professionals have an important role to play in confronting the 'denial industry'.

"We are used to challenging corporate interests that clearly endanger public health – tobacco control is an obvious example. Climate change is an even bigger threat, and we have a responsibility to speak out in order to protect the wellbeing of current and future generations."

[Dr Jones is co-convenor of OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate and Health, an organisation comprising senior doctors and other health professionals concerned about the effects of

climate change on population health. The group is part of a worldwide movement of health professional authorities seeking to address the daunting health challenges posed by climate change.]

Media are invited to attend the whole or any part of the conference.

To arrange interviews with Rhys Jones or any Conference speaker, please contact Penny Cooper (Conference media liaison): 0274 547 584.

Links:

- [Conference website](#)
- [Conference handbook and programme](#)
- [Presenter abstracts and information](#)
- [Presenter abstracts only.](#)