

Doctors say New Zealand fiddles while the world burns

OraTaiao Media Release – 3 November 2011

Senior doctors and other health professionals are backing calls in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* for the country to do much more to reduce the risks of climate instability to acceptable levels.

“The World Health Organization, leading medical bodies and medical journals agree that climate change is a major threat to human health and wellbeing. But New Zealand seems to be asleep at the wheel,” says Dr Rhys Jones of OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate & Health.

The calls follow a review in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* that shows the New Zealand Government’s response falling well short of what is needed to avoid the worst impacts of climate change.

“We agree that this calls into question our overall commitment to playing a part in global climate action,” Dr Jones says.

Dr Jones is astonished by New Zealand’s failure to take a strategic whole-of-government approach.

“Even raising this as a serious issue seems too hard, where engaging leaders can mean being fobbed off, and letters remain unread. There is much indifference to this critical matter of public policy.”

Dr Jones notes that climate change is already causing death, disease and injury around the world.

“As doctors, we have a responsibility to protect the health and well-being of the community. Just as a doctor ignoring a serious health problem would be guilty of medical malpractice, our inaction on climate change is abuse and neglect – but in this case on a global scale,” he says.

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Background notes

Dr Rhys Jones is a public health medicine specialist at the University of Auckland. He co-convenes OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate and Health.

The article in the New Zealand Medical Journal 'End-of-term review of the New Zealand Government's response to climate change: A public health perspective' (by Associate Professor Nick Wilson and colleagues, Wellington) is published this week, available at <http://journal.nzma.org.nz/journal/124-1345/4949/>.

OraTaiao has written to the Prime Minister about commitment to addressing climate change and health. This letter was sent on 4 October (2011) and asks for a whole-of-government approach to climate change in light of senior ministers' adverse public stances etc. The letter is available on the OraTaiao website at www.orataiao.org.nz under 'Submissions'. The letter was misplaced and has not been read by the recipient. It follows and refers to earlier correspondence from wider groups, similarly not dealt with.

About OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate & Health www.orataiao.org.nz

OraTaiao: New Zealand Climate and Health is an incorporated society comprising 140 or more senior doctors and other health professionals concerned about climate change impacts on health and health services.

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. It 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 2020;¹
 - ◆ 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.

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. <http://www.nzma.org.nz/journal/122-1304/3827/>