

## MEDIA RELEASE

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### **Key leadership role for nurses in responding to climate change emergencies** ***ACN White Paper: The Nursing Response to the Climate Emergency (2024)***

Ahead of Global Climate Change Week 2024 (14-18 October), the Australian College of Nursing (ACN) is today releasing its new *White Paper: The Nursing Response to the Climate Emergency (2024)*.

Among a suite of recommendations, ACN is calling for a review of how health services are provided in climate emergencies, including acknowledgement and incorporation of the key leadership role of nurses.

Deputy Chair of the ACN Climate and Health Faculty, Mark Holmes RN MACN, said today that the climate change evidence is undeniable.

“The global climate emergency - climate change and its resultant extreme weather events - is humankind’s most significant modern health crisis,” Mr Holmes said.

“As we face another period of predicted climate and weather extremes, Australian health professionals, including nurses, and first responders are called on too often to care for people and communities devastated by extreme events.

“Nurses are at the frontline of care provision in these emergencies and continue to provide leadership to mitigate future emergencies.

“Nurses are equipped to take the lead on emissions reduction within and beyond the healthcare profession.

“Nurses have an essential role as leaders, both professionally and personally, in reducing emissions and mitigating climate-related health effects.

“ACN fully supports the National Health and Climate Strategy and is keen to contribute its expertise to the Climate and Health Expert Advisory Group (CHEAG), but we are disappointed that more nursing leaders have not been included in their establishment and operation.

“Climate health and emissions reduction are complex issues that require a complex solution.

“A complete rethink and overhaul of how health services are provided in a climate emergency are required. We must forget traditional models of health service delivery that will not meet surging climate-related healthcare demands.

“We must develop a nationwide approach that foregrounds nursing wisdom contributing to a national climate response.

“Nurses must lead cross-sector collaboration to respond to surging health demands experienced in a climate emergency and be allowed to work to their full scope of practice,” Mr Holmes said.

### **Background:**

Healthcare professionals are witnessing the health effects of climate firsthand. The increasing intensity, frequency, and occurrence of natural disasters - combined with unprecedented climate-affected health problems – are placing significant pressure on our health system.

Paradoxically, the health sector significantly contributes to emissions while doing the most to provide care for people and communities affected by the impacts of climate change.

Climate health and emissions reduction are complex issues that require nuanced, evidence-based solutions - and nurses are ideally placed to deliver these.

As Australia’s largest and most geographically dispersed group of health professionals, nurses are uniquely positioned in the healthcare sector and our communities. Their combination of expertise, community trust, and engagement must be used to build resilience and reduce emissions.

This White Paper presents a four-step climate stewardship approach for nurses responding to climate emergencies.

First, we must rethink the way we provide health services in the current climate emergency.

Traditional, reactive health models focusing on disaster response will not meet the health system’s climate-affected demands.

We must develop a coordinated, national climate response that incorporates nursing wisdom and expertise.

Second, nurses must be enabled to lead emissions reduction strategies within health care through quantifiable and sustainable targets in the urgent transition to low-emissions health care.

Nurses must also be enabled to work to their full scope of practice and move to value-based, sustainable healthcare models to support patients.

Third, climate stewardship needs to be developed in the nursing workforce through climate education and research. This requires a radical shift in the education of nurses in climate health, emissions reduction, and sustainability. Climate stewardship must be integrated throughout the nursing curriculum.

Fourth, to understand the environmental impact of clinical care, data collection, monitoring, and reporting of the health sector's carbon footprint are imperative.

There is a need to evaluate Australia's healthcare industry's carbon footprint, data to guide emissions reduction targets, and enable continuous data collection for monitoring progress.

We must deliver fiscal, equitable, quality services in a climate emergency while reducing health care emissions. More broadly, nursing calls on all industries to prioritise lowering emissions.

### **Recommendations:**

ACN calls on State, Territory, and Federal governments to:

- Through the Health, Sustainability, and Climate Unit (withing the Federal Department of Health and Aged Care), implement the National Health and Climate Strategy to promote climate adaptation and engineer climate-resilient healthcare systems.
- Develop a minimum nursing dataset to identify and optimise the geographically diverse nursing workforce to enable a nurse-led, value-based, national healthcare emissions reduction strategy with achievable targets and outcomes administered by a national body.
- Ensure nurses are proportionately represented in the Health, Sustainability, and Climate Unit.
- Provide funding for specialty post-graduate qualifications in climate health, emissions reduction, carbon health literacy, and sustainability to support nurses transitioning into specialty leadership roles.
- Provide funding for a dedicated research grant scheme to expand nurse-led, inter-professional, and cross-sector climate research targeting planetary health, climate change, emissions reduction, and sustainability for clinicians in health care.

ACN calls on nursing education providers to:

- Embed planetary health, climate change, emissions reduction, and sustainability in all undergraduate nursing degrees in Australia to ensure every nurse has access to education and training to respond to climate health, act as climate stewards, and build community resilience.

The *ACN White Paper: The Nursing Response to the Climate Emergency (2024)* is at <https://www.acn.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/white-paper-the-nursing-response-to-the-climate-emergency.pdf>

The National Health and Climate Strategy is available at [www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/national-health-and-climate-strategy.pdf](http://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-12/national-health-and-climate-strategy.pdf)

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