

Submission

Climate Change in Western Australia Issues Paper

28 November 2019

The Aboriginal Health Council of Western Australia (AHCWA) is pleased to provide a submission to the WA Department of Water and Environmental Regulation's (DWER) Issues Paper on Climate Change in Western Australia. AHCWA welcomes the State Government's acknowledgement of the significant challenges posed by climate change to the health and prosperity of our communities, environment and country, and supports its vision to develop innovative and home-grown solutions to mitigate and adapt to climate change impacts.

AHCWA is the peak body for 23 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) providing comprehensive primary health care across diverse regional, rural and remote locations in Western Australia. AHCWA exists to support and act on behalf of our 23 Member ACCHS, and our principal vision is for Aboriginal people in Western Australia to enjoy the same level of health and wellbeing as all Western Australians.

INTRODUCTION

AHCWA and its member ACCHS are united in their concern about the ever-increasing impacts of climate change, particularly as they relate to the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people, their communities and country. Being on the front line of comprehensive primary health care service delivery across the diverse climates of WA, ACCHS are increasingly witnessing the effects of changing weather patterns and environmental degradation on Aboriginal people's health and wellbeing.

Ensuring the resilience of the Western Australian economy by exploring opportunities for innovation and safeguarding industry is, understandably, a key focus of the paper. However, just as significant when considering the challenges and opportunities brought about by climate change, is ensuring the resilience of individuals and communities through optimal health and wellbeing. As a sector, AHCWA and its member ACCHS are acutely aware of the ripple effect climate change is having across our environment and society, and the relationship between the environmental consequences of climate change and the health and wellbeing impacts being experienced by Aboriginal people.

As DWER would be aware, the WA Department of Health has been conducting a public inquiry into the effects of climate change on health. AHCWA has been very active in this inquiry and strongly recommends that DWER works closely with Professor Tarun Weeramanthri and his team at the WA Department of Health to ensure the State Climate Policy provides a truly holistic framework for the future.

AHCWA and its member ACCHS are using the WA Climate Inquiry and this submission to demonstrate that they are key, interested stakeholders in responding to the impacts of climate change, and are committed to collaborating with partners across the government and non-government sector

to identify issues, and develop solutions. Importantly, as traditional owners and custodians of the land and environment being effected by climate change, Aboriginal people and their communities must share the lead in this important work.

The primary focus of this submission is to demonstrate the impacts of climate change on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people and the ACCHS sector, and to share recommendations for future action. It will describe the current experience of ACCHS and Aboriginal communities in relation to: Safe and Healthy Communities; Biodiversity and Water Security; and, Infrastructure and Innovation. In response to the broad questions raised by the Issues Paper, AHCWA includes its recommendations from its submission to the WA Climate Health Inquiry.

A note on the Issues Paper:

- A key omission from the Issues Paper is any acknowledgment of the impacts of climate change on Aboriginal people and their communities in particular. Not only does this demonstrate a lack of awareness about the disproportionate impacts of climate change on Aboriginal people, but also neglects the expertise and knowledge that Aboriginal people can bring to developing solutions to climate change challenges.
- There is also insufficient recognition in the paper of the diverse challenges and opportunities brought by climate change for regional and remote areas of the state. The experience of people living in the Kimberley or South West are completely different to each other, and to the experiences of people living in the Perth metropolitan area. Climate solutions must be cognisant of the different people, cultures, languages, climates, skills and resources across the state; the climate response cannot be a one-size-fits all approach.

SAFE AND HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

As already noted, climate change is already having far reaching direct impacts on health and wellbeing. It is exacerbating existing health problems for Aboriginal people and their communities, resulting in an increase in their burden of disease, negative outcomes for their social and emotional wellbeing, reduced food and water security, and degradation of their homes, land, country and culture.

WA ACCHS bear witness to these impacts on Aboriginal people and their communities on a daily basis, and their Model of Care for providing primary health care is guiding their response. For Aboriginal people, health and wellbeing is holistic and defined by their connection to family, community, culture, language, country, physical wellbeing, spiritual wellbeing, and emotional wellbeing. The ACCHS Model of Care necessarily locates the person at the centre of these interconnected elements, and each one is considered when delivering health care and support.

As each element of Aboriginal health and wellbeing is connected, disturbance in any area is likely to impact the Aboriginal person and their community as a whole. This is what is occurring in Aboriginal communities as the impacts of climate change continue to increase. For example, when land erosion results in communities being displaced and having to move off country, it is highly likely that the social and emotional wellbeing of each individual Aboriginal person and the community will be negatively affected.

The WA Government must consider the interconnectedness of the environment and health, particularly as it impacts Aboriginal people, when developing its State Climate Policy.

To support safe and healthy communities, and the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people as they experience climate change, current actions being taken by ACCHSs include:

Preparing for and responding to extreme weather events:

- ACCHS work with other local services when confronted with storms, cyclones, flooding, bushfires and drought. They consult community on layout plans, speak with local experts, including Aboriginal Rangers, to understand risks and opportunities, and consider the location of flood plains and water sources.
- In the Fitzroy Valley, Nindillingarri Cultural Health Service (NCHS) has contingency plans to manage flooding in the wet season. Alongside other community organisations and government agencies, NCHS works with community members to ensure they have stocked food and water supplies, and medicines. Elderly people and other vulnerable people are brought into town to avoid being cut-off from services, and disaster responses are planned in advance.

Additional note: ACCHS have become increasingly concerned about the impacts of extreme weather events on the homeless community, which is forcing them to move from parklands into business districts for better protection. This is resulting in greater police and social interventions with homeless people, particularly in the Perth metropolitan area, and AHCWA identifies this as a key area for consideration of the WA Government in developing its State Climate Policy.

Adapting to extreme heat

- ACCHS located in the hottest areas of WA, including the Goldfields, Gascoyne, Central Desert Region, Pilbara and Kimberley, face extreme challenges for ensuring the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people, their communities, and staff.
- Air-conditioning units are essential in these areas but come at a huge cost to ACCHS. They require significant power to run, they need ongoing maintenance, and have only a limited life-span due to overuse. The build-up of red-dust, made worse by wind, is a key issue for their lack of durability.
- To ensure staff remain safe and healthy in the course of their duties under extreme heat conditions, ACCHS ensure that staff have access to essential items to ensure their health and wellbeing. When doing outreach to remote clinics, staff travel with kits equipped with sufficient drinking water, dissolvable electrolyte tablets, cooling sticks and a satellite phone in case of emergencies.

Responding to the social and emotional wellbeing of community members and staff

- In alignment with their Model of Care, many ACCHS provide social and emotional wellbeing programs in communities. These programs can be engaged to support community members affected by the health impacts of climate change, and staff (who are often community members themselves) experiencing stress and burnout as a result of increased demand for services.

Having an understanding of the interconnectedness of determinants of wellbeing for Aboriginal people and their communities, as illustrated by the Model of Care, places ACCHS in a unique position to lead climate adaptation and mitigation initiatives. ACCHS know what works, and why, and must be deeply engaged in developing any strategies and programs to address climate change in WA.

BIODIVERSITY AND WATER SECURITY

Biodiversity

As described by the Issues Paper, the consequences of climate change, including prolonged droughts and floods, rising sea levels, and increasing water temperatures, cause significant damage to the biodiversity of the natural environment, and threaten the survival of many animal and plant species.

The destruction of native plants and the habitats of wildlife, impacts the food security of many Aboriginal people and their communities. Bush food, or 'bush tucker', forms a large part of their diets, with many Aboriginal people using the land as their primary food source. Loss of these natural food sources creates a dependence on non-traditional foods which have a higher fat and sugar content which can increase the risk of chronic diseases such as Diabetes.

Bush medicine plays an important role in the holistic approach to health for Aboriginal people (Australian Indigenous Health InfoNet n.d.). Herbs and other plants from the natural environment with significant healing and protection properties, are used in traditional healing practices which have been sustained for thousands of years (Australian Geographic 2017). The loss of these plants through climate change has irreversible impacts on traditional cultural practices.

Traditional hunting and gathering has remained an important part of the Aboriginal way of life, and has significant cultural importance. Changes to the environment as a result of climate change can prevent these traditional practices from taking place which can lead to significant health problems, including social and emotional wellbeing issues associated with the loss of these cultural practices.

Water Security

Severe droughts and floods can cause water supplies to become contaminated compounding water security challenges already experienced by many Aboriginal people and communities in WA. In the dry Western Desert region of WA, studies are showing increased concentrations of nitrates and uranium in drinking water supplied to Aboriginal communities (Rajapakse et al 2019). In the Kimberley, water from shallow aquifers are prone to experience salinity when water levels are low.

Conversely, water contamination in wet seasons or regions of WA may occur as a result of flooding restricting access to clean drinking water and wastewater services (Government of Western Australia 2019).

To protect the unique biodiversity of this state, and ensure water security for its citizens, AHCWA and its Member ACCHS strongly recommend that Aboriginal Elders and their communities are consulted, that their expertise is valued, and their voices heard. They have the practical knowledge and generations of experience in land and waterway management. The WA State Climate Policy must engage genuinely with Aboriginal people to ensure appropriate climate solutions are developed.

INFRASTRUCTURE AND INNOVATION

Infrastructure

Climate change is causing significant infrastructure issues for ACCHS delivering services for Aboriginal people in different parts of the state. For example, unreliable power resulting from storms, flooding and extreme heat, has the potential to impact the cold chain supply of vaccines and other medicines to remote ACCHS clinics.

Extreme weather events, including rainfall and flooding, can cause many unsealed roads in regional and remote Western Australia to become inaccessible. Providing patient transport via air can be very costly and can also be limited when airstrips are inaccessible. This is of particular concern when communities become isolated by flooding or patients require urgent medical evacuation.

Housing and other community infrastructure can be significantly damaged by climatic events including flooding, humidity and heatwaves. Insufficient infrastructure and ventilation can increase the build-up of indoor pollution and mould, which can cause respiratory problems and the risk of disease to increase. The impacts of these climatic events on housing infrastructure can also limit the ability of Aboriginal clients to safely store medication within their homes.

Due to these harsh conditions, the need for maintenance can be unrelenting. However, maintenance services are often not readily available meaning there are often long delays for essential works to be completed, and for the transportation of equipment and parts into the community.

Innovation

ACCHS are consistently problem solving ways to improve efficiency in the way they deliver primary health care, and are increasingly exploring sustainable options for service delivery and infrastructure. In adapting to climate change, AHCWA and ACCHS are considering ways they could be doing things differently.

Puntuturnu Aboriginal Medical Service (PAMS) in the Pilbara, and Spinifex Health Services in the Goldfields, have traditionally relied on diesel generators to power their remote clinics. Not only is this poor for the environment but is also very costly. Each service has embarked on projects to harness the natural energy of the sun through the acquisition of solar panels.

ACCHS are also venturing into sustainable infrastructure, in part to improve their environmental footprint, but also to manage the harsh conditions under which many of them operate. A new sustainable clinic is currently being built at PAMS in Newman, which is an innovative new venture for the ACCHS sector. Sustainability, and the smart use of new technology, is also a focus for a new health hub at the South West Aboriginal Medical Service located in Bunbury.

Another key innovative initiative for the ACCHS sector is the Mappa project being delivered by AHCWA. Using the data of health services across Western Australia, an online tool is being developed that will enable people to be aware of, and access, health services as close to home and family as possible. Not only is it expected that Mappa will lead to improved health outcomes for Aboriginal people, but also that there will be environmental benefits as people will be travelling less by car and aeroplane to attend medical appointments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

AHCWA understands that the questions posed throughout the Issues Paper are intended to stimulate discussion and innovative ideas in response to climate change. However, AHCWA is concerned that the questions are limited in considering how government agencies, private industry and non-government organisations can work together, and importantly with the ACCHS sector, to address the impacts that climate change is having on the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people.

AHCWA has, therefore, not attempted to answer the questions as stated and, instead, offers recommendations for how Aboriginal people and the ACCHS sector can be better engaged to determine solutions for the health and wellbeing impacts of climate change.

AHCWA strongly suggests that DWER considers these recommendations as it drafts the WA State Climate Policy:

- Consult and listen to the Aboriginal community;
Aboriginal people, their communities and ACCHS are innovative and resilient. They have generations of traditional knowledge and expertise in managing and living on the land. Engagement with Aboriginal people, their communities and ACCHS must be genuine, and it is essential that, in any climate change response discussion, Aboriginal sovereignty and relationship with country is respected, protected and promoted.
- Genuine partnerships with Aboriginal communities;
ACCHS must co-lead, co-design, co-produce and co-evaluate climate change response initiatives. The position of the Department of Health's Sustainable Health Review (2019, p.4) that 'partnerships must be based on shared objectives and a common purpose, new levels of trust and respect, and formal sharing of risks and benefits', is strongly supported by AHCWA and its member ACCHS.
- A coordinated approach;
ACCHS are a key stakeholder and provider of primary health care services in the broader health community of WA; a community which needs to work together to respond to the health impacts of climate change. ACCHS welcome the opportunity to be part of a co-ordinated cross agency, cross-government, cross-community approach and strongly recommend that DWER works closely with the Department of Health to learn from its Climate Health Inquiry.
- Increase climate change awareness;
Education and awareness raising for Aboriginal people about the health impacts of climate change is a first step in gaining support for adaptation and mitigation initiatives in communities. Information needs to be culturally secure, and available in languages that different communities understand.
- Build capacity: Support healthy and resilient communities;
A commitment to building the capacity of ACCHS is required. This not only includes increased, more secure funding, but also a review of the available workforce to determine strengths and potential opportunities. Aboriginal Health Workers, Aboriginal Health Practitioners, and Environmental Health Workers are experts in their fields, and options to enhance their impact and drive their potential in responding to climate change must be explored.

- Invest in innovation;
New approaches to adapting to and mitigating the health impacts of climate change require innovation and investment. ACCHS consistently deliver innovative and flexible primary health care services for Aboriginal people but current investment and security of funding is inadequate. Too often, commissioning bodies provide funding for programs for which a lot of additional unfunded work is required. The economic burden for ACCHS responding to the health impacts of climate change must be recognised and appropriate funding be made available.
- Explore opportunities for Environmental Health;
Aboriginal people and communities living remotely are much more vulnerable to Environmental Health factors than people living in other areas of WA. This is often due to lack of housing, overcrowding, poor access to and cost of maintenance, limited access to clean water, and inadequate sewerage facilities. Environmental Health Workers in the ACCHS sector are experts in managing these kinds of health risks in conjunction with Aboriginal communities. They provide support and deliver services to improve infrastructure, waste management and sustainability. Environmental Health Workers have the potential to add significant value and expertise in responding to the health impacts of climate change.
- Sustain the effort;
While the threat of climate change is real, and the opportunities to adapt to and mitigate its impacts are evident, a genuine, collaborative and coordinated response to this challenge must be sustainable over time. This involves committed partnerships across agencies and sectors, ongoing and secure investment in climate health initiatives, and ingenuity in workforce development and management.

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