



Climate Change Action in Community Health

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Summary

The Climate Change Action in Community Health report gives a detailed account of the research project completed by Kristine Olaris from North Yarra Community Health. This project looked at the capacity of Victorian metropolitan Community Health Services (CHS), to respond to climate change.

Overview

The aim of the Climate Change Action in Community Health project was to determine the potential for Community Health Services (CHS) in metropolitan Victoria to respond to climate change.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Determine the current understanding of climate change within metropolitan community managed CHS
- Document the extent to which CHS currently implement policy and practices that respond to climate change
- Identify the barriers affecting the capacity of CHS to respond to climate change

The Climate Change Action in Community Health report outlines climate change effects that, according to the latest Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), are currently occurring.

These include:

- Increased temperature – eleven out of the twelve years between 1995 – 2006 were among the warmest in terms of global surface temperature since record-keeping began in 1850
- Sea levels have risen by an average of 3.1 millimetres per year from 1993 – 2003
- Changes in precipitation – floods and droughts
- Wind changes – contributing to droughts
- Extremes of temperature, including heat waves, and
- Increased extreme weather events such as cyclones

IPCC predicted the following climate change health effects that may occur in future:

- Altered rates and distributions of some incidence diseases – food, vector and water borne
- Food and water insecurity;
- Increased malnutrition and diarrhoeal disease



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- Decreased air quality leading to increased incidence of respiratory and cardiovascular illnesses
- Increased death, disease, stress related disorders, injury due to heat waves, floods, storms, fires and droughts; and
- Displacement of vast numbers of people living in low lying areas around the world

Climate change has the potential to increase health inequalities throughout Australia and across the world.

Results and Discussion

Twelve metropolitan community managed CHS participated in the project (52% sample). Each CHS representative was asked a series of questions relating to the objectives of the project.

Understanding of Climate Change

The results of the research include that:

- The majority of the CHS gave reasonable definitions of climate change
- Eleven of the twelve CHS correctly referred to increased fossil fuel use and/or its bi-products as a major causative factor
- When asked about the effects of climate change, the most common impact noted were the rising of sea levels, followed by direct health impacts and extreme weather events

Current Policy and Practices

To determine if climate change action was embedded at a strategic level in CHS, they were asked whether or not they had

- A governance level policy relating to climate change
- An organisational plan that refers to the issue
- A person or committee assigned responsibility for action
- Any systems of monitoring, measuring, reporting or reviewing climate change action areas
- Any resources assigned to climate change within their organisation

The majority of CHS responded that a systematic and strategic response had not yet occurred within their organisation.

When asked about climate change policies and practices, it became clear that CHS were taking action in a number of areas, including:

- Waste management
- Transport
- Energy use
- Actions targeting the community
- Staff awareness
- Building design



- Water use
- Purchasing

Scope of Possible Action

The four major areas commonly reported by participants as areas for possible climate change action in community health were:

- Decreasing their organisation's impact on the environment
- Taking a multifaceted health promotion approach to the issue which incorporates a robust lobbying and advocacy strategy
- Providing a direct service response to members of the community affected by climate change
- Being involved in collective action

Barriers to Action

CHS identified a large number of barriers affecting their capacity to respond to climate change, these were identified as:

- Funding was described as the "major hurdle" for the sector
- Government leadership – both State and Federal government
- The need for greater internal leadership and support in order for organisations to improve their responses to climate change
- The need to increase the level of skills, information and knowledge about climate change in the sector

Conclusion

In the conclusion of the report, the importance of the Community Health sector's role in response to climate change was emphasised. Currently there are barriers limiting their ability to do this. In Victoria, the metropolitan community managed CHS have displayed an interest, willingness and an ability to respond to climate change. All CHS involved in this study agreed that climate change is an important issue for the sector and expressed a desire to strengthen their responses in the future.

CHS identified a number of action areas in which the sector should be involved. These included; decreasing the environmental impact of individual CHS, to be involved in multifaceted health promotion responses that incorporate political advocacy and provide direct responses to the health impacts of climate change.

Recommendations

The key recommendations of the report were:

- Environmental working groups be established within CHS
- Greater funding for climate change actions and particularly for funding of infrastructure improvements
- Commitment for environmental policies and strategies such as energy targets and building standards to be applied to CHS
- Identification of climate change as a Victorian health promotion priority by DHS



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- Greater level of information and resources to be made available to CHS including:
 - Information on the effects of climate change with particular focus on health impacts
 - Clear and concise, evidence based information on effective strategies for decreasing environmental impact within CHS
 - A simple environmental self audit tool for use by CHS
- Development of a robust advocacy campaign particularly in relation to social justice issues, public policy, legislation and national and international responses to climate change

These recommendations were stated in order to strengthen the capacity of metropolitan community managed CHS to respond to climate change. The report concluded that in order to progress these recommendations a sector-wide and/or cross sector working group should be established. It was identified that this type of work could be coordinated by peak organisations such as VHA and/or VCOSS.

Further information

A full copy of the report can be found at the following link

<http://www.nych.org.au/publication/pdf/research/ClimateChangeActionInCommunityHealthProjectReport.pdf>