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SPEECH
AMA President, Dr Mukesh Haikerwal
Launch of the Joint AMA / ACF Climate Change Report
Canberra

22 September 2005

EMBARGOED UNTIL 9.30AM THURSDAY 22 SEPTEMBER 2005

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, ACF colleagues and project researchers.

Today we are calling for a national response by governments, businesses and individuals to one of the world's most significant environmental threats – climate change and its effect on human health.

I warmly welcome you to the launch of this report, *Climate Change Health Impacts in Australia: Effects of Dramatic CO2 Emission Reductions*, work jointly commissioned by the AMA and the Australian Conservation Foundation.

National and international leaders in climate change from the Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the ANU and the Department of Public Health at the University of Otago in New Zealand, have shared their wisdom and their concerns.

It is no accident that my welcome to you is a warm one.

Perhaps if I were delivering this speech 50 years from now it would be a hot welcome.

Our world is getting hotter because of greenhouse gases – gases caused by burning fossil fuels like oil, gas and coal.

Average temperatures across Australia are predicted to increase by as much as 6 degrees by 2100.

We're not just talking about a longer summer or a shorter ski season.

The consequences are far more serious.

Climate change will damage our health.

People will get sick as a direct result.

People will die in larger numbers as our earth – our world, our home heats up.

This research tells us this and more.

The AMA has been pushing for change for some time.

We held our first environmental health summit in Melbourne in 2002 where the work of researchers, Doctors Linda Selvey and John Sheridan, exposed the scale of the impact of climate change on human health.

Since then AMA presidents have advocated strongly for action and change.

Today's report adds to that early work, especially the research on heat related illness and dengue disease.

Climatologists say global climate change will have a major impact on human health on a scale not previously encountered by human society.

Today's report points to evidence of the damage being done now and it gives us a couple of scenarios to consider.

It glimpses a future determined by active climate change policy.

And it shows us the consequences of no action.

The results are both confronting and valuable.

If we do nothing, serious harm to our environment and our health is a given – sooner than you might think.

Today's report gives evidence of this harm and strengthens our demands for urgent action.

A big problem for Australia as the temperature rises is the gradual southern migration of dengue and other mosquito borne disease.

With strong climate change policy, while the zone for potential dengue transmission is likely to move south to Rockhampton or Gympie, it would stay north of the more heavily populated south-east Queensland, coastal NSW and metropolitan Sydney.

Rising temperatures will also lead to more heat related deaths, especially in elderly people.

In Australia around 1100 people over the age of 65 die each year due to high temperatures.

But we could be looking at 8000-15000 deaths by the year 2100.

Other health risks, addressed previously but not covered by this report, include an increase in water and food borne disease.

We can also expect an increase in extreme weather events like flooding, drought and cyclones and the direct and indirect impact of these events on human health.

We've seen that drought, for example, can lead to higher rates of depression and suicide particularly in remote and rural areas.

Catastrophic global events also affect human health – events such as the climate change induced destruction of the Amazon rainforest, the disintegration of the Earth's great Ice Sheets in Greenland and west Antarctica, and rapid changes in the El Niño and monsoon systems.

Pollution caused by motor vehicles is another well-documented cause for concern. Reducing these greenhouse gases will lead to cleaner air.

The Report shows that a 50 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from road transport could prevent 300-500 premature deaths each year in Sydney and Melbourne.

Adding 10 per cent ethanol to petrol will benefit our health without damaging our cars.

We can reduce the health risks caused by air pollution by:

- Introducing mandatory bio-fuel blends – 10% ethanol in petrol and 20% bio-diesel in diesel
- Reducing highly toxic aromatics such as benzene in petrol
- Using LPG or compressed natural gas instead of petrol or diesel
- Using filters and gas-detoxification systems in road tunnels

As part of its commitment to a healthier future, the AMA's position on climate change states that:

- Human health is ultimately dependent on the health of the planet and its ecosystem.
- It is possible to mitigate the potential health effects of climate change through improved energy efficiency, clean energy production and other emission reduction steps
- An effective emissions control program could be instituted without having a negative impact on the Australian economy. This can best be achieved by combining energy conservation with new alternative technologies that reduce dependency on fossil fuels
- Federal Govt should implement a national greenhouse Policy – engaging all Australians in an attempt to dramatically cut our greenhouse pollution. This includes increasing public awareness.

We recognise the importance of renewable energy sources, and call on the Government to set a Mandatory Renewable Energy Target of 10 per cent by 2010.

Some of the damage has been done.

But all is not lost.

By urgently adopting measures like these we can do a lot to reduce the speed and severity of climate change. In fact the ‘compound interest effect of action and, woe betide us, inaction now will make a significant impact on our environment.

The next five to ten years will determine the kind of world we leave to our grand children and great grandchildren.

This window of opportunity won’t last forever.

We can secure a healthy future for our environment if communities, businesses and governments work together.

Although the risk of harm may seem relatively remote for many of us it will be the less fortunate who will be the first to suffer.

The report shows that climate change will exacerbate poverty, increase migration and may lead to large-scale population displacement throughout the Asia/Pacific region.

We need to show leadership.

We need to care both at home and away – or to use the old phrase, think globally and act locally.

The AMA commends the Federal Government for joining the *Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate*.

This partnership also involves the United States of America, China, Japan, India and South Korea and aims to address climate change – but not at the expense of economic development.

Here's hoping the partnership is more than hot air.

Climate change will affect all of us.

It is not an extremist issue. It's a here and now issue. We can and we must act..... now.

Could I introduce to you the co authors of the report:

Dr Rosalie Woodruff from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at the Australian National University, who will fill you in on the detail of the report in just a minute.

And...

Dr Simon Hales from the Department of Public Health, Wellington School of Medicine, University of Otago in New Zealand.

Other authors include:

Professor Tony McMichael and Dr Colin Butler, also from the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at ANU, who unfortunately could not be here today.

And now would you please welcome ACF President, Professor Ian Lowe.

Thank you.