

Climate change and adaptation for health and social services

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The issue of climate change is now clearly recognised nationally and internationally. This was highlighted by the agreement of nearly 200 nations in Paris late last year to target restricting global warming to 'well below 2°C'. Most of the attention with regard to setting these targets has been on the reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions and the impact of that on future energy sourcing/use and economies. But the reality is that with existing and ongoing warming, natural and human systems are and will be affected and societies need to respond with adaptive actions.

This book addresses adaptation options for the health and social services sectors in Australia. Whereas the results of a significant amount of research related to the impacts of climate change on health and social wellbeing are available, this book, commendably and timely, aims to 'assemble this evidence in a way that would inform adaptive action by health and social service organisations'.

Twenty-five academics and professionals from across Australia prepared the 12 chapters of this book, which were arranged in three sections:

- The issues, understanding climate change, the responses and how to speak about it.
- Vulnerable populations and organisations and appropriate adaptations.
- Organisational adaptation.

Their combined theoretical and practical experiences have provided an invaluable handbook for those with operational responsibilities in the health and social services areas by sharing ideas about options for defining and implementing adaptive responses. This includes an Appendix that contains an audit tool for climate-change adaptation. Most chapters contain explicit lists of recommended actions to underpin adaptive change making this truly a handbook for raising, for these sectors, awareness of options but with practical solutions for action. There is a healthy acceptance that risks associated with climate change may only be defined in probability terms, but the lack of perfect knowledge is not an excuse for inaction.

A theme common to many of the chapters is that disadvantaged members of the society, such as older people, people who are chronically ill, those who have disabilities, the socially isolated, and in some cases women and children, are the ones most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change. Thus they are in need of support in order to make adaptive responses. That climate change deepens inequalities is a conclusion that has been frequently derived on an international scale suggesting that least developed nations will be more vulnerable to climate change than those that are developed.

Climate change is a pressing moral and ethical issue for reasons of equity and fairness.

The authors question, in Australia's case, just how resilient existing social and health services really are. It is anticipated that, although some responsibility for supporting these services lie with the federal and state governments, there will be an increasing demand for local government and support groups to provide services. It is argued that the need for such support reflects in part the societal distribution of power. Although the emphasis is on the disadvantaged this does not preclude social and health issues that need to be managed with respect to those in society regarded as advantaged.

A second theme, pervasive through the volume, is the need for holism in any constructive assessment of both impacts and adaptation options. Holism means that physical, social and economic factors are incorporated into assessments, cutting across western and alternative cultural views and spiritual values. The text provides some emphasis on the need for the inclusion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture but also highlights migrant and refugee peoples and those from rural communities. There is also a call for more academic research in these areas to underpin practical actions, a recognition of the importance of evidence-based policy development.

A third theme has to do with environmental stewardship; clearly a strong component of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander concept of 'country', but implicit in the cultures of many religions as a commitment to stewardship on behalf of respective deities. This may be reflected in the concept of 'caring for country' or the idea of 'solastalgia' when there is an important personal attachment to the environment in which one lives. It is argued that to tackle climate change humans need to overcome their disconnection from ecosystems; loss of 'place' can lead to psychological grief in isolation.

The volume suggests that for the health and social services sectors there are three major impacts to be managed: heat waves; social and economic changes; and extreme weather-related emergencies. There is a potential conflict between market-based mitigation policies (e.g. rising prices of utilities to reduce consumption) and disproportionate negative effects on some parts of the community. It is argued that neoliberalism has progressively undermined the ability of small industries and primary producers to control trade of their commodities leading to a sense of powerlessness and vulnerability.

The practical communication related to the issue of climate change is discussed with websites for guidance about framing conversations and the need for messages to be delivered in a culturally centric framework that addresses individual needs of communities. Further, developed countries are largely unaware of the criticality of the resilience of community service organisations to the resilience of communities themselves, particularly those most disadvantaged.

Editorially this is an impressive publication. Although it is a compendium of research, practical experience and advocacy, written by many authors, the text reads almost as written by a single author. There is remarkable consistency in the language, sectional layouts and the provision of practical recommendations and a substantial Index. The abundant citation of literature will open up further opportunities for the reader to explore both the

academic and grey literature. It is a delight to read text that is almost free of the use of acronyms and one can only admire the degree of care taken from an editorial point of view.

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