



UK HEALTH
ALLIANCE ON
CLIMATE CHANGE

The Rt Hon Theresa May MP
Prime Minister
10 Downing Street
London SW1A 2AA

29th November 2018

Subject: UK Health Alliance on Climate Change call for net zero emissions target

Dear Prime Minister,

As representatives of over 600,000 health professionals across the UK, we are writing to warmly welcome the Government's recent announcement that it is seeking advice from the Committee on Climate Change on setting a net zero greenhouse gas emissions target. In doing so, we call on the Government to set a target for reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions before 2050.

The World Health Organisation has described climate change as the "greatest threat to global health in the 21st century".¹ The exceptional heat in the UK this summer reminds us of the challenges a changing climate poses to the health of British people, particularly the most vulnerable, the young and the elderly.

Today, the *Lancet Countdown*, a global, interdisciplinary research collaboration on the links between climate change and health, publishes a new report warning of the growing negative health impacts of climate change in the UK and around the world. In particular, threats to health from increasing heat are becoming more frequent and more dangerous. Heatwaves are associated with increased rates of heat stress and heat stroke, exacerbations of heart failure, and acute kidney injury from dehydration. Previous heatwaves have taken a toll: the 2003 heatwave, for example, resulted in an additional 2,000 deaths in the UK.²

The recent Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change report made plain the need to limit temperature rises to 1.5°C and, in order to do so, bring greenhouse gas emissions to 'net zero' globally by 2050. As we celebrate ten successful years of the Climate Change Act, now is the right time for the UK to commit to playing its part in limiting temperature rise to 1.5°C, and so we call on the Government to set a target for reaching net zero greenhouse gas emissions before 2050. This is a view held by the vast majority of healthcare professionals, with a recent poll from YouGov commissioned by the Alliance showing that 79% of healthcare professionals support the UK adopting an aim to cut its carbon emissions to zero in the next few decades.

Climate change is a very real threat to health in the UK through both the physical and mental harm resulting from an increase in frequency and severity of extreme weather events, such as heatwaves. But acting on climate change presents a profound opportunity to improve health as many of the drivers of climate change – fossil fuels, over-consumption, and poorly designed cities – also cause ill health themselves, through air pollution, unhealthy diets, and physical inactivity.³ We therefore also call on the government to enshrine a principle of maximising the health benefits of reaching net zero, through, for example, increases in active transport, healthier diets, and reductions in air pollution. We offer our assistance in understanding and developing responses to climate change that maximise health benefits.

The UK Health Alliance on Climate Change represents the UK's major health institutions, including Medical and Nursing Royal Colleges, Faculties, the BMA, The BMJ and The Lancet. In calling for the government to commit to a net zero target, we would be delighted to arrange an expert briefing on the health impacts of climate change for the UK, the concerns of the UK health profession, and our views on the appropriate policy response.

We look forward to your response.

¹ World Health Organisation (2015) 'WHO calls for urgent action to protect health from climate change', webpage. <https://bit.ly/20Th9c4>

² Johnson H, Kovats RS, McGregor G, Stedman J, Gibbs M, Walton H, et al. "The impact of the 2003 heat wave on mortality and hospital admissions in England", *Health Stat Q*, 2005(25):6-11.

³ Watts N, et al. "Health and climate change: policy responses to protect public health." *The Lancet* 386.10006 (2015): 1861-1914.



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Yours sincerely,

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Acting Chief Executive and General Secretary,
Royal College of Nursing

Professor Andrew Goddard
President, Royal College of Physicians

Professor Dame Parveen Kumar
Chair, BMA Board of Science

Dr Richard Horton
Editor-in-Chief, The Lancet

Dr Jonathan Leach
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Professor Sir Simon Wessely
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Professor Wendy Burn
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Dr Fiona Godlee
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Professor Russell Viner
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