Sharing your voice — healthy action for climate change

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Here we are now — what’s next?
As we write in July, "Team Aotearoa" has muted community transmission of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), for now. So far, we’ve stepped up to this challenge, despite the COVID-19 crisis continuing offshore and sadly with rapidly growing waves in impoverished countries with less health sector capacity. Our country contemplates recovery, and the chance to build a much healthier future.1-3

Our shared COVID-19 experience exposes fault lines of an over-stretched health service and inequity across our country — but our visions of what we can do together to care for each other have expanded so much.

Post-pandemic renewal in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) must include everyone, with Te Tiriti o Waitangi partnership in everything that matters: decent jobs, decent housing, and a strong resilient health service within a healthy environment.

Climate change is a health threat
The health of each person that we treat has a complex background. Sometimes we can see that earlier actions may have prevented someone from becoming a patient now. Practising medicine means both responding to each patient’s needs and advocating for better health for all,4-6 where the four physical, emotional, social, and spiritual pillars of health (our hauora whare)7 all stand in a healthy environment.

A healthy environment includes atmospheric warming kept below 1.5°C.8 Climate pollution is contributing to major health issues, growing disease burdens and increasing premature death around the world.5-12 The continuing health effects are potentially catastrophic, and NZ will not be immune from these.5 Climate impacts, if unchecked, will widen inequities.13 But well-planned action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions means substantial health gains in the short and longer term. As The Lancet has said, “tackling climate change could be the greatest global health opportunity of the 21st century.”15(p1861)

Here in NZ, just as it is overseas,16-20 the most vulnerable will be hit first and worst.11-12 We must reject arguments that trade off climate against a fairer NZ, that acting on climate pollution increases poverty. The reality is we need to urgently act so every one of us in NZ can thrive (see the UN Sustainable Development Goals),28 without burning up a high emissions pathway.

What our country must do for climate health
Make healthy choices. With post-pandemic renewal in Aotearoa NZ, let’s choose carefully what we take into our future. Fossil fuels are the energy of the past. Every subsidy and every stimulus must move us to clean energy and growing the future industries, not resuscitating past climate polluters. Decisive government action determined which countries are coping with COVID-19, and which are not. Climate protection also demands bold, coordinated action, led by government.

Look beyond our shores. NZ must take fair climate action as a wealthy and historically high-emitting nation. Pacific leaders guided global decisions to limit warming below a hopefully humanly adaptable 1.5°C. Worldwide, emissions must halve by 2030, and drop by at least 76% each year.23-27 Under United Nations (UN) climate rules, more effort is expected from comparatively well-off countries. So that means NZ is expected to reach net zero emissions “well before 2040” in this global task. That’s just 20 years from now.

Talk about how quickly we need to act. The faster we cut emissions, the better the impact, the easier the changes, and the more likely we can keep climate changes to humanly adaptable levels. Global citizenship means we must also resource less well-off countries to thrive (see the UN Sustainable Development Goals).28 without burning up a high emissions pathway.

We know we can be powerful together. Let’s make our COVID-19 recovery dollars do triple duty towards a fairer climate-protected hopeful future. Our future must include everyone, with Te Tiriti partnership in everything that matters: decent jobs, decent housing, and a strong resilient health service, within a healthy environment where climate-polluting emissions drop by at least 7.6% annually this decade.26,27 NZ’s Climate Change Commission calls for a climate change lens across all post-pandemic rebuilding — with six key principles to keep climate protection on track:29

1. Look for long-term climate benefits from stimulus investment — analyse investments using long-term emissions prices that match our climate goals.
2. Bring forward transformational climate change investments that must happen anyway — for multiple gains now.
3. Prepare people for tomorrow’s jobs.
4. Shape the economic recovery plan in partnership with iwi/Māori, using the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi.
5. Keep up incentives to reduce emissions and adapt to climate change.

Do read recent OraTaiao co-convenor Alex Macmillan’s response30 to the NZ Interim Climate Change Committee’s call for expert evidence, as the latest comprehensive summary of NZ’s climate and health issues and opportunities. We also recommend the NZ College of Public Health Medicine’s Priority Actions for Climate Health 201831.
and the excellent How to Talk About Climate Change cheat-sheet, short guide and toolkit from The Workshop.32

Reflections on advocacy for a healthier climate

Like many, we stumbled into climate health advocacy as inexperienced introverts after an “oh sh*t” moment in 2006. Not working out whether we had the skills to help, what best to do, or anything like that. Just: this is BIG, how can we help?! We started with personal change to cut our household emissions, becoming involved and influenced by others who had advocated climate protection for years. Then in the New Zealand Medical Journal (NZMJ), a hundred doctors called for NZ to pledge to halve emissions at the 2009 UN climate meeting in Copenhagen,21 demonstrating the power of collective action.32

From there, working with many already strongly committed to organising for climate action, OraTaiao: The New Zealand Climate and Health Council began in 2010 — joining the global movement of health professionals advocating the health challenges of climate change and the health opportunities of climate action. The name “OraTaiao” was gifted — connecting the concept Ora as alive/well/safe/ cured/recovered/healthy with Taiao as world/Earth/environment/nature/country. The group had to be organised, strategic, and safe — and OraTaiao developed a constitution, structures, and processes, with two co-convenors (one Māori) and governance by an annually-elected executive board, as an incorporated society. Every health professional, health student, health organisation, and others can join OraTaiao at https://www.orataiao.org.nz/join_us.34

International and local evidence gets stronger: we can get real health gains now and in the future from smart climate action — this is a win-win situation.

Over the last decade, OraTaiao has led and shared many different climate experiences, working with many people and collaborating across a health sector increasingly committed to climate health action. OraTaiao’s action has grown from the vision of “healthy climate, healthy people”, strategy huis, and strong commitment to climate change responses promoting equitable health and social outcomes consistent with Te Tiriti. Examples are many and varied (see appendix).5—44 alongside a joined-up health sector calling for climate action — collaborating with the New Zealand Medical Students’ Association (NZMSA), Medical Colleges, the New Zealand Medical Council (NZMCA), and other health sector groups.5,12,47-49

So what follows, for post-pandemic renewal, are our anecdotal thoughts on climate and health advocacy, with help from friends. Most ideas are hard-won from messy experience, and some we wish we’d taken. We also write as tauvii (non-Māori), conscious of our relative privilege, colonisation, our country’s history of ongoing failures to honour Te Tiriti o Waintangi, and that some New Zealanders are repeatedly forced into activism52 by the injustices that exist across Aotearoa.

We hope this discussion helps your medical advocacy journey: encourages you to value your own insights, perspectives, leadership, and energy; consider what works for you (and what doesn’t); and encourages you to support, share, and explore how friends, colleagues, and mentors can help, and you help them. Above all — Ehara taku toa i te too takitahi, engari he too tokitini (my strength is not as an individual, but as a collective).

You’re not the perfect climate saint yet?

Don’t think that you have to be the perfect climate saint before speaking out. Yes, there’ll always be those critics who tell you to be perfect before saying anything — don’t let them silence your important voice. Sometimes our own “imposter syndrome”53 and those internal voices — “why me?” and “what can I offer?” — can be the biggest barrier.

Look for what you care about, and do what you find easy to start with. Experiment with reducing your own climate-damaging footprint — there are the Household Climate Action Tool14 and Toitū Environment Care Household Calculator55,56 to help you.

What do you enjoy doing, or could try? Different roles grow climate-protecting action. Are you a researcher, a writer, a talker, or a doer? An organiser or happy to be organised? Paint placards or help hold them? Think of climate action as a rich bright patchwork quilt of many different people acting in different ways and in different places. Your patch matters.

What can I do — and how?

Climate action is always that ongoing dance between being strategic, getting the background planning in place, and seizing the oppor-
tunities. Advocacy needs both opportunists and strategists — sometimes each of us has to do a little of both.

Build your knowledge bit by bit. Gradually grow your knowledge of climate change; the impacts and health consequences; and the options for emission reductions. It’s worth understanding the corporate, political, economic, and other vested interests blocking urgent change.

You may need to challenge sacred cows and myths. For example, methane is promoted as a greenhouse gas that doesn't stay that long in atmosphere, and that ruminants are carbon neutral — carbon dioxide (CO₂) is removed from the atmosphere as the grass grows. But many fertilisers are fossil-fuel derived, and methane in our atmosphere packs a much bigger punch than carbon dioxide... and warms our oceans for hundreds of years.61

So, for many households, businesses, and community facilities along NZ’s highly populated coastline, how much methane our cattle and sheep burp each year matters a lot. Oceans warmed by methane and CO₂ are expanding and eating away at our coastline, let alone the rest of the world where an estimated billion people occupy land less than ten metres above current high tide levels, and 230 million less than a metre, with estimates of 1-1.8 metres of sea level rise by 2100.62

For more detail on the health, equity, and climate costs of agriculture, see the appendix*.

Grow your understanding of equity and climate justice. How does climate change worsen global, national, and local injustice, leading to avoidable illness and death? How can a net zero carbon future be inclusive, healthy, and equitable?

Constantly consider whose voices are loudest and who’s missing from conversations? Are climate ideas, campaigns, and conversations shaped in Te Tiriti partnership from start to end? Are the experiences of tangata whenua clearly to the fore? A zero emissions future not of tangata whenua clearly to the fore? A zero emissions future not co-constructed in Te Tiriti partnership is fundamentally zero emissions colonisation.

For tauiri, a key role is to honour Te Tiriti, respecting and supporting Māori-led climate action, and operating in genuine partnership. There is much to learn, including how to work together and to work with (not against) Papatuanuku. Hear the voices of the Pacific. Being comfortable with being uncomfortable can grow deeper understandings.

What are the needs of various people in any given situation? Is there a clear way someone in a climate-destructive industry can easily get decent similarly paid work in a more sustainable industry? What happens to a town when a climate polluter is forced to shut down? What’s the pathway to better jobs? What’s proposed for the most vulnerable, people who are already in hardship? Are there climate-protecting solutions that also make lives easier? Have these solutions been built together?

Talk the walk. As you work to reduce your own personal footprint, share your personal experience. Experiment, make mistakes, be gentle on yourself, laugh, and try something else. Above all, talk about changes you’re making personally, why, and what changes you want. When you are visible and encouraging, you become approachable, as others consider cutting their impact. We are social creatures influenced by those around us, especially people we like.

Talk — and listen. Influence is a two-way process — we have much to learn from each other in how we create a future that’s climate-safe and where everyone can thrive. Practical experiences help change at a wider level — contact a local councillor to make your bike commute safer, or encourage a local shop to waste less.

Look for opportunities — people, places and times you can influence. We need the big government decisions, but we also need people to support politicians who will take those decisions. People’s hearts, minds, and actions influence and interact right across NZ.

Think household, workplaces, your district health board (DHB), family and friends, community groups, local businesses, iwi, local councils, and central government. Some DHBs have sustainability officers — support yours, or call for your DHB to do this too. Link with your university’s sustainability staff and groups. Use the Royal New Zealand College of General Practitioners’ (RNZCGP) Greening General Practice toolbox63 and the Ministry of Health’s Sustainability and the Health Sector guide.64,65

Formal opportunities come often. The NZ government is constantly consulting on policy changes that have climate implications, from transport to trade, and much more. These consultations may be directly from government departments, or from parliamentary select committees where you can talk to MPs.65–67 City and regional councils call for your feedback every year, on annual and long term plans. Cities can seriously help cut emissions, as more councils sign up to climate plans.

Recycle and upcycle your work. Share your submission or event with others to make it easy to grow greater numbers. Encourage colleagues, friends, family, and other groups to quickly have their say. Turn a written submission into a media release, newspaper letters to the Editor, or an opinion piece for a newspaper or a medical journal viewpoint article. Grow your message by recycling your submission ideas into the public space.

Upcycling tweaks and transforms materials for greater value. Celebrate successes, critically self-examine, reflect, review, and learn how to do it a little better for the next time. Health care has gained hugely from continuous quality improvement. It’s worthwhile to apply those principles to climate advocacy.

Find ways to work with others. Sometimes a task shared between several seems easier to sign up for: Bring friends, or involve your family and flatmates. Be part of existing advocacy groups, or start your own if there’s a gap that needs filling. Sometimes belonging to an advocacy group means filling an ongoing role, or joining events and taking on tasks when you have space, but simply being a member can grow a group’s strength. Encouragement goes both ways, including of leaders and mentors. So value what you can do.

Build alliances with other advocacy groups, with other health professionals, amongst the Colleges, the NZMA, and with other students.68 Help each other, and share thinking and submission work. There is power in numbers, and shared interests. Take turns in taking the lead. Alliances can sometimes surprise. Rational and/or incremental policy changes appeal — but there’s also the “garbage can” approach, where unlikely alliances with a shared interest can join to get fast change.69 Be flexible.

Grow relationships with media, politicians, and other influential people. Do you have an issue, a good news story or a news tip, or evidence that demands action? Put yourself in their shoes — what do they need to make their job easier? What interests them? Can you tell your story quickly and credibly? Give reliable information? Real-life experience makes an impact. Our often two degrees of separation in NZ means although you may not be able to talk directly to someone in a position to take valuable climate-protecting action, you might know someone else who can talk directly. Or who knows someone who could connect you. Think laterally and creatively.

What’s next?
Sharing your unique strengths and working with others in the service of something big and meaningful can be an amazing, life-giving experience. Mixing with people with great values, ideas, and skills can be inspiring and life-changing. Friendships grow from working together. Relationships build trust, and the ability to know who to call to quickly to make something happen.

Medical advocacy for climate health matters for healthy solutions that are fast, fair, and honour Te Tiriti. Hopefully learn from successes and failures, yours and ours. Be part of the climate health, public health, and medical advocacy communities. Discover the real difference you can make, together. Kia kaha.

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