

Consensus Statement: **Climate change, midwifery and environmental sustainability**

The midwifery profession in Aotearoa New Zealand, recognise the significance of climate change and its serious threat to health. Rapid and effective action is necessary to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (GHG) and to achieve net-zero GHG emissions. The College and its members are committed to health-centred climate action and supporting national and global initiatives which reduce the negative impacts of climate change<sup>1</sup>.

**Rationale:**

Climate change is predicted to increase in the years to come, and the impact on human health will be significant [2]. Climate change effects include extreme weather events, heat waves, altered rainfall patterns, rising sea levels, population displacement, increased incidence of communicable diseases, and food and water shortages. Climate change has produced considerable shifts in the underlying social and environmental determinants of health<sup>2</sup> It is the biggest global health threat of the 21st century but urgent actions to mitigate climate change are being employed<sup>3</sup>.

In te ao Māori all natural resources and the environment are regarded as one and the same which involves unique spiritual concepts, the most important of which is mauri - all of life has its own life-force. Mātauranga Māori (knowledge) has historically facilitated a balance with the natural environment. Māori, and also Pasifika people, women, infants, children, the elderly, families on a low income and disadvantaged communities are likely to be the worst affected by climate change<sup>4,5</sup>.

Aotearoa New Zealand is a member state of the United Nations and has adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, including the Sustainable Development Goals<sup>6</sup>. Issues of health are linked to all seventeen goals. Supporting action on sustainability by midwives and health organisations, can lead to benefits for individuals, organisations and communities<sup>7</sup>.

The College is a member of Ora Taiao (The New Zealand Climate and Health Council) and supports the organisational vision of “Healthy Climate, Healthy People<sup>8</sup>. The mission statement and purpose include the need to educate New Zealanders on the threat of climate change, to support interventions that combine health and environmental benefits, encourage action to promote a rapid reduction in greenhouse gas emission and to promote equitable health and social outcomes that are consistent with Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

Midwives as healthcare professionals have an important role in influencing social change. They can introduce parents (through education) to the need to consider life style changes to reduce their carbon footprint. They can also support climate actions within their communities and their working environment<sup>9</sup>.

Midwives have a unique insight into the impact of climate emergencies and can be actively engaged in the promotion of environmentally sustainable strategies<sup>10</sup>. Home birth, primary birth, physiological birth and breastfeeding support health and wellbeing and are environmentally friendly. Midwifery is generally a low-technology, low environmental impact profession and sustainability in midwifery practice can be achieved.

## Recommendations:

All midwives can make changes in their working lives and consider how to reduce their own carbon footprint:

Some areas to consider are equipment, consumption and transport. For example:

- Discuss pregnancy, labour and birth care choices from an environmental sustainability perspective with women, including the promotion of physiological birth practices.
- Protect, promote and support breastfeeding where possible
- Endeavour to purchase or use sustainably produced consumables and other equipment to reduce the impact on the environment (for example: avoid plastic bags for placenta and consider the use of muka or organic cotton cord ties instead of plastic clamps)
- Consider low environmental impact transport options and reduce unnecessary travel

The College has developed a page on its website which will provide contemporary information to educate and support midwives with environmental sustainability.

<https://www.midwife.org.nz/midwives/climate-change/>

## References:

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5. Jones R, Macmillan A, Reid P. Climate Change Mitigation Policies and Co-Impacts on Indigenous Health: A Scoping Review. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2020;17.
6. United Nations. Sustainable Development Goals 2016.
7. Ministry of Health. Sustainability and the health sector: a guide to getting started. Wellington: Ministry of Health; 2019.
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9. Davies L, Daellenbach R, Kensington M. Sustainability, Midwifery and Birth 2nd Edition. 2 ed. Abingdon, UK: Routledge; 2020.
10. Martis R. Good housekeeping in sustainable midwifery practice. In: Davies L, Daellenbach R, Kensington M, eds. Sustainability, midwifery & birth. London: Routledge; 2020:162-78.

## Ratification:

This statement was ratified at the New Zealand College of Midwives AGM on 3 November 2021