

Consensus statement:

Climate change

Approved, awaiting ratification



New Zealand
College of Midwives
TE KĀRETI O NGĀ KAIWHAKAWHANAU KI AOTEAROA

Consensus statement:

Climate change

Tauāki | Statement

The New Zealand College of Midwives | Te Kāreti o ngā Kaiwhakawhānau ki Aotearoa (the College) acknowledges climate change as a critical and escalating global health threat. Rapid and effective action is required to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related weather events have significant consequences for livelihoods, food security, water availability and human security. The College is committed to health-centred climate action and supporting national and global initiatives that reduce the negative impacts of climate change. Supporting action on sustainability by midwives and health organisations can lead to benefits for individuals, organisations and communities. The “fingerprint of climate change” has been described as beginning before a baby is born, due to pregnant women already enduring environmental crises that their children will be exposed to after birth (Pacheco, 2020).

*Ko au te whenua, te whenua ko au
I am the land and the land is me*

Te Reo | Language

College statements utilise words from Te Reo Māori to acknowledge and respect the indigenous language of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Whakamārama | Background

Climate change is expected to worsen in the coming years, with profound effects on human health. Its consequences include extreme weather events, heatwaves, changing rainfall patterns, rising sea levels and the displacement of populations. Additionally, climate change increases the spread of communicable diseases and exacerbates food and water shortages. Food security is already being compromised by rising temperatures, unpredictable

precipitation, and frequent extreme weather events (Mbow et al., 2019). At the same time, our industrial food systems contribute significantly to greenhouse gas emissions through land use, storage, transportation, packaging and processing.

The degree to which different populations are vulnerable to the health impacts of climate change varies depending on geography, demographics, background burden of climate-related health conditions and the capacity of local health systems (Jones et al., 2014). Climate change has become a pressing public health issue, necessitating immediate and effective health-protecting policies at both national and global levels. Midwives, as frontline health workers, play an essential role in public health (ICM, 2014), and midwifery is generally a low-technology and low environmental impact profession.

As healthcare professionals, midwives are uniquely positioned to influence social change. They can implement lifestyle adjustments to lower their own carbon footprints and advocate for climate action within their communities and workplaces. Pregnant women, infants and young children are among the most vulnerable to climate change, with many women already experiencing inequity, poverty and marginalisation (Maani et al., 2020).

Environmentally friendly practices such as homebirth, physiological birth and breastfeeding can support health and well-being while reducing environmental impacts. Infant feeding practices are particularly significant; the environmental impact of the production of milk formula powder and the lack of protection for breastfeeding are interconnected issues that must be addressed to safeguard the environment.

However, focusing solely on individual behaviour change will not be enough to solve the public health challenges posed by climate change. The most pressing issue is the lack of adequate governmental response to climate change threats and the regulation of industries contributing to environmental degradation.

Corporate influence on population health is well documented and there is growing evidence that the economic power of corporations has defeated, delayed and weakened public health policies (Mialon et al., 2020). Addressing these commercial determinants of health is essential to protecting vulnerable populations. Māori, Pasifika Peoples, women, infants, children, the elderly, low-income families and disadvantaged communities are among those most likely to suffer the worst effects of climate change (Desai & Zhang, 2021; Dunne, 2020; Jones, 2019).

Whaiwhakaaro ahurea | Cultural considerations

In te ao Māori, natural resources and the environment have their own mauri | life force. Mātauranga Māori emphasises the importance of balance within the natural environment. For Māori, the people of a place are related in personal terms to its mountains, land and rivers, as well as the ecosystems and species present through whakapapa (ancestral lineage and connection). These are taonga tuku iho – treasures passed down through time under kaitiakitanga | guardianship (MfE, & Stats NZ, 2021).

The climate crisis will affect the health of indigenous peoples due to a range of factors already recognised, which include relationships with the natural environment, socioeconomic deprivation, issues with access to quality healthcare and political marginalisation (Jones, 2019).

Tikanga | Guidance for practice

- When considering lifestyle and workplace factors, midwives can factor in choice of equipment, consumption of resources and transport options.
- When appropriate, pregnancy, labour and birth choices can be discussed with consideration of an environmental sustainability perspective. This can include discussion about physiological birth practices.

► Ko au te whenua, te whenua ko au



For Māori, Papatūānuku is the source and sustainer of the land and all its life including humans. Our relationship with her has many facets.



Whakapapa

Our whenua is our identity. Through the whenua we whakapapa to our tūpuna/tipuna. We use the boundaries of our tribal land to introduce ourselves, referencing our mountain, river, land, and ocean.

Tūrangawaewae

The whenua is our home, our place to stand. The word whenua also means placenta. This demonstrates the lifelong connection formed when our placenta is buried after birth until we die and are returned to the whenua.

Hauora

A healthy whenua is fundamental to our health and physical, mental, spiritual, and social wellbeing. It provides resources to feed, shelter, and heal our whānau, opportunities to learn, and connects us to Papatūānuku.

Kaitiakitanga

When we act as kaitiaki and care for and protect our land, we uphold the mana of our ancestors and remember the struggles of those who came before us.

Tino rangatiratanga

Tino rangatiratanga is a way of living according to tikanga that safeguards the land and its resources for future generations.

Momotu

Different understandings and breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi led to conflict and the New Zealand land wars. Laws were also used to take away and alienate Māori from their whenua.

Glossary

Ko au te whenua, te whenua ko au: I am the land, the land is me | hauora: health | iwi: extended kinship group | kaitiaki: guardian | kaitiakitanga: guardianship/stewardship | mana whenua: customary authority exercised by iwi/hapū | momotu: separated | Pākehā: non-Māori New Zealander, generally European | Papatūānuku: Earth mother | tikanga: customs/protocols | tino rangatiratanga: sovereignty and self-determination | tūpuna/tipuna: ancestors | tūrangawaewae: place where one has the right to stand | utu: concept of reciprocity or balance | whakapapa: genealogy/descent | whenua: land

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- The use of nitrous oxide with oxygen multiplies the carbon footprint of vaginal birth 25-fold. Alternative methods of pain relief or nitrous oxide destruction systems lead to a substantial improvement in the carbon footprint. Clinical need and maternal choice are paramount but, where possible, the environmental impact of different choices can be considered (Spil et al., 2024).
- The protection, promotion and support of breastfeeding as the “highest-quality, local and sustainable first-food system” (Smith, 2019) can contribute to a significant reduction in global carbon footprints. Commercial milk formula production generates high greenhouse gas emissions (Smith et al., 2024).
- Using sustainably produced consumable supplies and other equipment can reduce the impact on the environment, for example:
 - Avoid use of plastic bags for the placenta
 - Use muka pito or organic cotton cord ties instead of plastic umbilical cord clamps
 - Encourage use of reusable nappies and period underwear
 - Opt for reusable (rather than single use) instruments

Rangahau | References

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Whakamana | Ratification

This statement (uploaded 5 May, 2025) will be ratified at the College's AGM on 27 August, 2025. This statement replaces Climate change, midwifery and environmental sustainability, ratified 3 November 2021.

Arotake | Review - August 2030

The purpose of the College's Guidance Statements is to provide midwives, whānau and the maternity services with the profession's position on any given situation and provide guidance for practice. These guidelines are designed to educate and support best practices, and are regularly reviewed and updated in line with evidence-based practice.

Please note: Statements may be updated within the review period. We recommend midwives refer to the College website for the most up-to-date versions.

Tūtohu | Suggested citation

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