

Recovery from the pandemic: evidence-based public policy to safeguard health

TO THE EDITOR: In Australia, 2020 began with raging bushfires, and we now confront the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. While health protection is currently at the top of the public policy agenda, can we rise from these huge ruptures and “build back better”?

The full health costs of the bushfires, including the mental health toll, are yet to be quantified. No sooner had the bushfires abated than the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic began. The immediate public health response has been well managed in Australia.¹ Although Victoria is currently grappling with a second wave of infections, by international comparisons the number of cases and deaths around the country has remained low.² Government leaders have listened to health experts and acted on evidence, including the need for strict physical distancing in the absence of a vaccine, supplemented by universal masking in Victoria.

As governments move to revitalise the economy with financial stimulus, what

guidance can health experts provide to inform this stimulus?

One clear priority is that stimulus accelerates the decarbonisation of the Australian economy. Climate change is a recognised health issue. Published as the bushfires erupted, the 2019 *MJA–Lancet Countdown on health and climate change* report³ found that Australia is extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change on health. There are also health co-benefits from action on climate change. The clearest example is the transition to renewable energy generation. Globally, in 2015 alone, more than 460 000 preventable deaths were attributable to coal burning.⁴ An urgent transition to renewable energy would be an evidence-based public policy response to these deaths and assist a global green recovery from the pandemic which is called for by the World Health Organization.⁵

Australia is well placed to lead such a recovery as indicated in a recent report by ClimateWorks Australia,⁶ which provides a blueprint to achieve net zero emissions by 2050 through accelerated uptake of mature zero emission technologies and the rapid development and commercialisation of emerging zero emission technologies in harder to abate sectors (Box).

Beyond stimulus for decarbonisation, investments in affordable housing, mass

transit infrastructure, safe routes for walking and cycling, regeneration of degraded ecosystems and infrastructure to support working from home would also benefit health through reduced homelessness, improved levels of physical activity, and improved urban air quality.

Australia has, thus far, avoided the high COVID-19 case numbers and death rates seen in some other countries because of evidence-based decision making. It is essential that decisions about the stimulus for economic recovery are similarly grounded in evidence. The health and wellbeing of current and future generations of Australians depend on it.

Selina N Lo^{1,2}
Anna Skarbek³
Anthony Capon¹

¹ Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Monash University, Melbourne, VIC.

² The Lancet, London, United Kingdom.

³ ClimateWorks Australia, Monash Sustainable Development Institute, Monash University and Myer Foundation, Melbourne, VIC.

selina.lo@monash.edu

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Summary table of key emissions-reduction solutions by sector

	Demonstrated + mature solutions	Emerging solutions
 Electricity	100% renewable, storage (including batteries), demand management	There are sufficient demonstrated and mature solutions to decarbonise these sectors. However, emerging solutions could decrease costs and aid deployment at scale
 Buildings	Deep energy efficiency, electrification	
 Transport	Electric and fuel-cell vehicles for light road transport	Biofuels, synthetic fuels, electrification, ammonia or hydrogen for other transport
 Industry	Energy efficiency, circular economy, proven electrification, bioenergy and biofeedstocks, industrial CCS	Material substitution, high grade heat electrification, solar thermal, hydrogen
 Agriculture + land	Sustainable agricultural practices, plant-based substitutes, fertiliser management, carbon forestry	Laboratory food, enteric fermentation treatments (such as livestock vaccines)

CCS = carbon capture and storage. ♦

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