

RACGP submission to the Senate inquiry into Algal blooms in South Australia

August 2025



About the RACGP

The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) is Australia's largest professional general practice organisation, representing more than 43,000 members nationwide working in or towards a career in general practice including four out of five general practitioners (GPs) in rural Australia. We cultivate a stronger profession by helping the GPs of today and tomorrow continue their professional development throughout their careers, from medical students and GPs in training to experienced GPs. We develop resources and guidelines to support GPs in providing their patients with worldclass, best practice healthcare. Our members are supported to be involved in all areas of care including preventive care, mental health, chronic disease, aged care, and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. We also provide the knowledge and tools for GPs to establish, manage and enhance their clinical practices so they can run a full-service healthcare offering to their patients, families, and communities they operate in.

The RACGP South Australia Faculty provides local support to 3,876 South Australian members through training, education, events and workshops. The South Australia Faculty advocates on behalf of GPs throughout the state on issues that impact them and their communities.

Additionally, the RACGP has a dedicated Climate and Environmental Medicine Specific Interest Group made up of almost 2,000 members focused on protecting human health from the impacts of climate change. This group worked within the RACGP to ensure that in December 2019, the College recognised climate change as a health emergency. The Group also helps drive the RACGP's advocacy for policies that mitigate the health risks of climate change at local, state, and national levels.

Introduction

The experience of South Australia and the ongoing algal bloom crisis impacting our shores and waterways is one of an increasing number of climate change driven events impacting our nation's health and wellbeing. It is critical that the response to this event addresses the health impacts for affected communities.

State and federal governments will need to manage a growing number of these climate driven health events in coming years and there is an ongoing need to better plan and prepare for how to respond to them. Climate change is already having widespread impacts on the health of individuals and communities across Australia.¹ More frequent and severe heatwaves, bushfires, floods, storms and droughts have had profound impacts on affected communities and caused a wide range of short and long-term physical and mental health problems.² Climate change is also driving the spread of mosquito-borne diseases³ and threatening the security of food, water and shelter, with the risk that entire communities could be displaced.^{1,4}

Key recommendations

RACGP South Australia calls on the Federal Government to consider the following actions:

1. Acknowledge the role of climate change in contributing to the algal bloom crisis and future similar disasters
2. Specifically review and monitor the immediate and ongoing health impacts of this crisis to inform future responses
3. Better include GPs and support for community health in future disaster management responses
4. Fully fund and implement the National Health and Climate Strategy
5. Act immediately to reduce emissions to help prevent the scope and scale of future climate-related disasters impacting community health

Terms of reference responses

a. Ecological, economic, cultural and social impacts of algal blooms

SA Health's current online alert for the 'Marine Algal Bloom – 8 August 2025' states that the health impacts of the algae include skin irritation (swimming), eye irritation (swimming or exposure to sea spray or aerosols), respiratory symptoms such as cough and shortness of breath (exposure to sea spray or aerosols). Research has indicated potential toxicity of *Karenia mikimotoi* to mammalian cells and identified a need for further investigation into any potential harmful impacts on human health.⁵ It is therefore important to monitor the populations of affected communities to assess for potential health impacts related to exposure to the algal bloom.

The broader health impacts of this crisis may include:

- Mental and physical health impacts related to experience of this disaster as well as broader distress regarding climate change and ecological degradation (Climate anxiety)^{6,7,8}
- Mental and physical health impacts related to loss of exercise opportunities from the inability to access the marine and coastal environmental impacted by the algal bloom⁹
- Mental and physical health impacts related to economic hardship and loss of livelihoods, particularly for those involved with tourism and fishing industries.^{10,11}

The National Health and Climate Strategy has laid out a range of actions and recommendations that will help mitigate and minimise the impacts of future climate related disasters.¹¹ The Federal Government should fund and implement the strategy as a matter of priority.

b. The cultural and economic impacts on Indigenous communities

The health impacts of these climate health crises are being felt disproportionately by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Environmental degradation, rising seas and extreme weather are unjustly compounding existing health and wellbeing inequities facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.^{4,11}

State and federal governments must acknowledge these disproportionate impacts and consider specific responses that support the ability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to manage and respond to climate health crises.

c. The coordination of state and federal government responses, including support, industry engagement and scientific advice;

The Federal Government and South Australian Government, particularly through SA Health, have attempted to inform and alert South Australians regarding the health impacts of this algal bloom. Social Media posts, online alerts, and traditional media have raised awareness of the issue; however, GPs have reported a lack of communication and information regarding their role in responding to the crisis.

GPs provide essential support to communities before, during and after disasters. However, general practice is not consistently represented in federal, state and territory or local disaster management planning. To increase community resilience, GPs must be included in disaster planning, mitigation, response and recovery at all levels.

This need is reflected in the National Health and Climate Strategy, noting the role of General Practitioners in building resilience to the health impacts of climate change. However, further action needs to be taken to better streamline the role of GPs in responding to disasters and the climate health crises more broadly.

This crisis may also present an opportunity to inform future responses based on lived experience. However, if any useful information and data is to be gathered, a targeted approach to monitor the immediate and ongoing health impacts of people exposed to the algal bloom is required.

d. Any related matters.

RACGP maintains that the primary response of state and federal governments to reducing the impact of climate related health emergencies should be to immediately reduce emissions and fast-track a just transition that

addresses the needs of individuals, communities and countries to move away from fossil fuel energy systems towards a more diverse, resilient and inclusive economy powered by renewable energy.

The role of GPs in climate crises

GPs and other primary healthcare professionals have a key role to play in preventing adverse health outcomes in their patients from climate change and extreme weather events and advocating for patient access to appropriate resources to reduce health risk.

Consideration of the patient's context is needed in developing preventive health strategies in relation to climate change. This may include their location and potential climate hazards, demographics and disease profile, access to financial and social resources, including adequate housing, and access to cooling, power and refrigeration.

Conclusion

RACGP South Australia acknowledges the efforts of both the South Australian and Federal Government in responding to the current algal bloom crisis impacting our shores and waterways. This crisis will have immediate and ongoing ecological, economic, cultural, social and health impacts for South Australia and is one of an increasing number of climate related natural disasters that our state and nation will need to respond to. Now is an important time to be monitoring and researching the health impacts of these climate health crises to better inform our current and future responses.

GPs are the first point of contact for most Australians seeking healthcare, this means that they are uniquely placed to assist the community in managing the health impacts of climate related natural disasters. They often have unique relationships across their communities and can support both long-term ongoing and first-time patients to manage during these situations. To increase community resilience to climate health crises, GPs must be included in disaster planning, mitigation, response and recovery at all levels.

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