



PHASA

Public Health Association
of South Africa

Primary Health Care Directorate
UCT Faculty of Health Sciences
OMB Groote Schuur Hospital
James.Irlam@uct.ac.za

18 November 2019

The Honourable Minister Zwelini Mkhize
Minister of Health

minister@health.gov.za; SethoM@health.gov.za; MajaP@health.gov.za

Copied to:

The Honourable Minister Barbara Creecy
Minister of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries
mndamase@environment.gov.za ; fshaik@environment.gov.za

The President of the Republic of South Africa
The Presidency
Mieke@presidency.gov.za; Nijele@law.co.za

Dear Minister

RE: URGENT ACTION NEEDED ON CLIMATE, ENERGY AND HEALTH IN SOUTH AFRICA

I write on behalf of the Climate Energy and Health Special Interest Group (SIG)¹ of the Public Health Association of South Africa (PHASA), which was formed in 2017 to advocate for healthy energy policy, prevent climate and air pollution-related diseases, and to promote approaches for healthy living.

We noted that Minister Creecy confirmed the establishment of the Presidential Climate Change Commission (the "Commission") in October 2019. The objective of this Commission is "*to become a key platform for facilitating South Africa's 'just transition' to a low-carbon economy*".² As the SIG focusing specifically on climate, energy and health issues at PHASA, we welcome the establishment of this Commission at Presidential level, we agree that it should "*begin in earnest*" and that an inclusive just transition process goes beyond coal jobs. Moreover, it is our respectful view that the current levels of air pollution in parts of South Africa and the existential threat of climate change that we all face, presents a public health emergency. In fact, the Department of Environment, Forestry and Fisheries acknowledges that there is already evidence that extreme weather events in South Africa are increasing, including heatwaves and prolonged droughts.³

This reality requires urgent action, driven by the Commission, and it is crucial that, you, as the Minister of Health, supported by your Department, fulfil a cooperative and leading role in this process.

¹ The Climate Energy and Health (CEH) Special Interest Group: <https://phasa.org.za/special-interest-groups/climate-energy-and-health-sig/>

² <https://www.engineeringnews.co.za/article/presidential-climate-change-commission-to-be-just-transition-crucible-creecy-2019-10-07>

³ See <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-09-16-summer-in-south-africa-heatwaves-and-the-very-real-effects-of-climate-change/>

In short, we believe that you are compelled to act, and act now, for the following reasons:

- 1) the World Health Organisation (WHO) has declared air pollution a “*global public health emergency*” and considers air pollution the greatest environmental risk to people’s health.⁴ Chronic air pollution in parts of South Africa kills hundreds of people per year, mostly due to respiratory diseases;
- 2) the WHO estimates that between 2030 and 2050, climate change is expected to cause approximately 250 000 additional deaths per year, from malnutrition, malaria, diarrhoea and heat stress.⁵ Recognising the enormous threat of climate change, 20 countries have declared “*climate emergencies*” to date;⁶ which includes Argentina, the United Kingdom, Canada, France and parts of Australia;
- 3) the National Climate Change Response Policy states that due to the temperature increases expected in South Africa, “*life as we know it will change completely*”, significantly affecting human health;⁷ the Climate Change Bill, published in 2018, also emphasises that climate change represents an “*urgent threat to human societies*”;⁸ and
- 4) among other objects of the National Health Act, 2003, it must fulfil the rights of the people of South Africa to an environment not harmful to their health and well-being – section 24(a) of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa – and it requires the Minister of Health to “*endeavour to protect, promote, improve and maintain the health of the population*”.⁹

Health is the bottom line of the climate crisis, and the injustice of “climate apartheid” against the poor and most vulnerable people living in South Africa demands action from the health sector, as a whole. We are adamant that the public health community has a responsibility to be part of the solutions to address this crisis, but we cannot do so without your leadership. As a first step in this process, we implore you to adopt an active position in steering the work of the Commission, as this is certainly one of the endeavours to protect and promote the health needs of the population, including children, so gravely threatened by the impacts of climate change.

The SIG supports calls for an **urgent and just transition** from unsustainable polluting fossil fuels to cleaner renewables that, among other features, seeks to prioritise people’s health, preserve workers’ livelihoods and build new capacity for a local renewable energy industry. Such a transition is a massive undertaking, akin to the National Health Insurance Bill, that requires widespread “buy-in” and a clear and inclusive strategy within a tight timeframe. The co-benefits for climate mitigation and public health are immense.

This just transition process will truly require a collective effort and the health sector, under your leadership, cannot be absent if we are to succeed. We are committed to assist this effort for the sake of present and future generations.

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/oct/27/air-pollution-is-the-new-tobacco-warns-who-head>; <https://www.who.int/emergencies/ten-threats-to-global-health-in-2019>

⁵ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/climate-change-and-health>

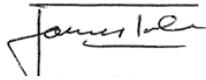
⁶ <https://climateemergencydeclaration.org/climate-emergency-declarations-cover-15-million-citizens/>

⁷ https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/national_climatechange_response_whitepaper.pdf, at page 9.

⁸ https://www.environment.gov.za/sites/default/files/legislations/climatechangebill2018_gn41689.pdf, Preamble.

⁹ Section 2 and 3(1)(a).

Sincerely



James Irlam

Chair: Climate Energy and Health Special Interest Group, Public Health Association of South Africa



Diane Gray and Lori Lake

Chair: Advocacy Committee, Department of Paediatrics and Child Health, University of Cape Town



Coenraad FN Koegelenberg

President: South African Thoracic Society

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