

CLIMATE CHANGE – MITIGATION, ADAPTATION AND HEALTH

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Climate change has been described as the most important challenge facing humanity in the 21st century. Policies and action are required to both mitigate and adapt to climate change. A key challenge will be to break the link between economic output and emissions. Critically, how can the human species achieve development that is both environmentally and socially sustainable?

There is increasing recognition globally that the longer effective mitigation measures are delayed, the greater climate change effects will be and the more difficult it will be to design adaptation measures to deal with these changes. A so called ‘2 degree guardrail’ has been proposed as the threshold under which humanity should be aiming to keep global temperature increases to avoid ‘dangerous climate change’. However, the goal of staying within this 2 degree guardrail (above preindustrial average temperature) seems to be increasingly difficult and probably impossible to achieve.

With such challenges in mind, what are the implications for human and animal health? Firstly, professionals working in these domains need to truly understand that overall population health is dependent on maintaining the earth’s life support systems. Secondly, climate change and all its interrelated effects on the ecosystem are reminders that we are indeed dealing with a complex adaptive system—and dealing with complexity means accepting that notions of control and certainty are obsolete. Notions of resilience become increasingly important. In this complex system environment, there are often no ‘right decisions’ but simply more suitable decision pathways. Thirdly, no single organisation can address the issues of climate change and health. Partnerships and collaboration will be absolutely essential to build a more coherent view of the future landscape and to devise a range of strategic options about what might need to be done and how to do it.

