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Somewhere to Live: Make Healthy Housing the Norm Housing Condition

Health equity in Aotearoa has been left unaddressed for far too long. The longer we ignore it, the more urgent the issues will become and the greater the resources which are lost in terms of human potential and lives. The RACP is committed to making health the norm for all, now.

Our members look beyond a three-year election cycle for the resources to make and sustain the changes urgently needed to realise the promises of Te Tiriti o Waitangi – equity, active protection, and tino rangatiratanga for all people of Aotearoa. We recognise that good health is supported by much more than infrastructure or staff: we need to look at the factors that promote healthiness, and work outside our traditional borders to advocate, collaborate and create.

The RACP's vision for health equity in Aotearoa NZ is enduring. We want to see a more fair and just society for the year when Aotearoa commemorates the bicentennial of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 2040.

Our vision for Aotearoa in 2040: A healthy home is a human right

- Homes can be heated and cooled effectively and cheaply
- Indoor air is warm and dry to reduce mould and damp inside

RACP recommendations to make healthy housing the norm

- Mandate a Healthy Housing Warrant of Fitness to support the enforcement of the Healthy Homes Standards legislation
- End prompt payment discounts for energy charges
- Bring forward Kāinga Ora compliance with Healthy Homes Standards to July 2022
- Ensure all public and community-owned dwellings are subject to a Healthy Homes Standards Warrant of Fitness assessment by July 2023, and private landlords by July 2024

This is Maria. She's 21 years old, and lives in the outer suburbs of a big city. Maria came to the city for work and moved in with her aunt, uncle and cousins. The location was perfect: they live out near the airport, where Maria found work as a cleaner at a nearby hotel. Maria shares a bedroom with her 19 year old cousin, and their clothes are often spotted grey with mould. Maria's asthma has worsened since she moved in. The house has cracked guttering which overflows when it rains, and the pipes under the house leak. The property owner is overseas, and his friend is managing their tenancy. Although Maria's uncle has left messages about the leaking gutters and downpipes and the mould inside, nothing has been fixed.



“I'm reaching for my inhaler all the time. My chest feels tight and it's hard to breathe”

MARIA ON LIVING IN A DAMP AND MOULDY HOME

Homes in Aotearoa NZ are cold and damp – and it's bad for health

Although there might be less tobacco smoke in the air, and a greater likelihood of ceiling insulation in our homes in 2020, the “draughty, cold and damp” New Zealand home is still unexceptional.

Living in cold, damp and mouldy homes increases the risk for health conditions for all ages including asthma, rheumatic fever, bronchiectasis, pneumonia, cardiovascular disease, chronic respiratory conditions, allergies, and fungal infections. For children and adults who already have compromised immunity, disability, or mental health conditions, substandard indoor environments have cumulative effects, making it harder to recover from illnesses, and reducing wellbeing and quality of life.

There are real inequities in our housing

Evidence shows Māori and Pasifika whānau are more likely to live in cold, damp and mouldy homes compared to other population groups, and rates of preventable health conditions in our Māori and Pacific communities signal severe and persistent inequities in housing condition and quality. When rates of asthma and respiratory conditions are broken down by age, there is a strong U-shaped curve.

A World Health Organization systematic review finds that infants, children and older people are more vulnerable to the effects of mould and damp in particular because they spend more time inside. Tamariki and rangatahi living in damp, cold and mouldy homes are more likely to have asthma, eczema and other allergies; and be hospitalised with severe respiratory infections. These conditions are preventable if warm, dry and safe homes are the norm.

Mark is 47. He rents a downstairs flat in a small town. The design of the flat means it can't be insulated under the floor, and only in parts of the ceiling cavity, making it expensive and difficult to heat. Mark has a small fan heater he runs sometimes in the winter, but he knows if he does, he has to save extra money for his power bill. It's easier for Mark to keep the oven on with the door open and warm the kitchen area.



“I leave the oven on to warm my place up a bit. I have one of those fan heaters, but it eats up the power. I can never get the fast payment discounts either. It costs a lot to be warm”

MARK ON HEATING HIS FLAT

A Warrant of Fitness (WOF) for healthy homes

A WOF is one way to guarantee that homes meet minimum standards for health and safety. The Healthy Homes Guarantee Act 2019 states a property's compliance with insulation, heating, ventilation, draught-stopping and moisture barrier standards must be indicated through a tenancy agreement; and a landlord's failure to comply with the standards is taken to be an unlawful act.

There is no mandated independent assessment of whether a home meets the Healthy Homes Standards. The statement included as part of a tenancy agreement does not say which Standards have been met, nor when work or remediation was undertaken. Independent validation of Healthy Homes Standards via a WOF programme would give assurance to tenants, property managers and property owners. The poor condition of rental housing stock in Aotearoa NZ is proven; however assessing where an individual dwelling sits in relation to the Standards remains a lot harder.

COVID-19 has set back implementation timeframes for the Healthy Homes Standards, and further delays are likely. It is essential that the COVID-19 recovery and rebuild prioritises the upgrade of public housing stock and the building of new housing stock. Earlier compliance with the Healthy Homes Standards will mean that whānau living in public housing – many of whom live with chronic health conditions, mental health conditions and disabilities – have a basic indoor environment that is healthy and not harmful.

Homes that are warm, dry and safe are important for health. Whānau living in houses that can be heated and cooled effectively will have a better quality of life. This means fewer days off sick from work or school, reduced energy costs, and improved mental wellbeing. The RACP calls for a whole-of society response, including government and civil society to urgently address unsafe housing in Aotearoa NZ and make Healthy Housing the Norm.