Working with general practice

Christine Phillips
ANU Medical School
Companion House Medical Service
After the fires

Worsening of chronic disease

Psychological distress

Social distress
Housing, work, functioning family unit

Displaced, evacuated people with loss of usual social networks
Social disruption

- Crowded, temporary, unsatisfactory housing
- Loss, or contraction, of work
- Loss of animals
- Contractions of social network
- Compounding trauma – drought, then fire, then flood
"One of the lessons that we learned is that people trust their GPs, they are the people who are already part of that community and they will go and seek their assistance, rather than some health service or counselling service that's been brought in from the outside"

Professor Sandy McFarlane, after the Ash Wednesday fires
GPs should consider referring when....

If one month after the experience, the person:

- Still feels upset, very teary, or fearful most of the time
- Has changed behaviour compared to before the trauma
- Can't function in normal activities
- Has worsening relationship issues.
- Is overusing or abusing substances
- Feels jumpy or disturbed sleep
- Is dwelling on the event
- Is unable to enjoy life; numbness or withdrawal
- Is experiencing overwhelming grief that prevents functioning

Royal Australian College of General Practitioners
Against diagnosis

“How could I trust her? She looked me up in a book and told me I was in there.”
Keeping our antennae up

• Children
  Quake children, Christchurch: 2011 Long term follow up suggested that they had sustained emotional dysregulation

• Prior trauma – war veterans, partner or family violence
  “Hidden public health problem” Hurricane Katrina: Increase in physical intimate partner violence against women; After Black Saturday 2009 fires; after Christchurch Quake

• Defenders and firefighters

• Helpers
Keeping our antennae up #2

- Heightened reactions to patients (or clients or students)
- Increased arousal (sleep disturbance, irritability)
- Avoidance (including alcohol)
Working with mental health services

• Identify need
• Refer to the right person
  – GPs need to know about you. The local Primary Health Network is the appropriate service to distribute information to GPs about your capabilities.
Medicare Bushfire Recovery Initiative

• Mental health affected by the bushfire crisis
• Not necessarily living in fire-affected areas
• 10 sessions till December 2021
• No Mental Health plan required
• May self-refer
• Australian Government encourages bulk-billing

**TIPS TO LOOK AFTER YOURSELF**

- Allow time - to regain a sense of normality.
- Recognise when it’s getting too much - if you’re feeling overwhelmed, seek extra support.
- Talk to someone you trust - talking about your emotions can help put things into perspective.
- Develop an action plan - decide who’s going to do what and when and write it down.
- Take care of yourself - eat well, exercise and sleep. Try to get back to your normal routine.
- Consider professional help - if you don’t feel some return to normal after four weeks.
- Support children - provide comfort, limit exposure to media coverage, allow them to ask questions.

**MEDICARE BUSHFIRE RECOVERY COUNSELLING**

Anyone impacted by the bushfires can access Medicare bushfire recovery counselling.

You do not need a mental health plan from a doctor or a diagnosed mental illness to obtain these services. View a list of services here.

**COORDINARE FUNDED NO-COST MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES**

- **Grand Pacific Health**: face-to-face or phone counselling. Call 1800 222 987
- **Royal Far West**: video counselling for 0-15 year olds and their families. Call 02 8966 0500
- **headspace**: 12-25 years old, call Euga 1800 959 454, Goulburn 02 4824 4544, Queanbeyan 02 6296 0300, Nowra 02 4446 7930 or Wollongong 02 4220 7660.
- **Digital mental health coach**: EoLiVaTa is a free online mental health coach available by phone or tablet. Find out more here.

View the full service list here. We will continue to update this list as services change.

**CALL AN EXISTING HELPLINE**

- Lifeline - 13 11 14 or have a dedicated bushfire recovery support line on 13 43 57 lifeline.org.au
- Beyond Blue - 1300 22 4636 beyondblue.org.au

**OTHER NO-COST MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT OPTIONS**

- **Remote Psych telehealth**: video counselling for anyone impacted. Call 13 22 47 799
- **Beyond Blue**: a free telephone and online support service. Call 1300 22 4636
- **Lifeline**: call 13 11 14 for free support or text LIFELINE to 12345
- **Beyond Help**: a free telephone and online support service. Call 13 11 14

**OTHER SUPPORT SERVICES**

- **Service NSW Bushfire Customer Care**: can help people navigate support. Call 13 77 88 or go to www.service.nsw.gov.au
Working with GPs

• Stay in touch
• If you feel the person’s illness warrants medication, broach this with the person and the GP
• Have your response plan for suicidality or other risks
Communities build resilience

- Landcare activities and garden activities “Phoenix groups”
- Church or other social groupings
- Men’s sheds
- Country Women’s Association
- Programs for children
- Animal rescue programs
- Animal and bird recovery