Looking back, thinking ahead

In this special segment for AJEM's 40th anniversary issues, we interview past journal contributors about their early articles, what has since changed in the fields they work in, and their ideas and suggestions for the future of AJEM.

Listening to Macedon: early lessons in children's psychosocial recovery after Ash Wednesday

An interview with Ruth Wraith

In the early 1980s, there was an emerging awareness in Australia of the psychosocial impacts of disasters on people, their families, and communities. At the time of the Ash Wednesday Bushfires in 1983, I was a child psychotherapist at the Royal Children's Hospital with a particular interest in community-based children's health. My colleague Rob Gordon, a psychologist, and I were seconded to the Macedon area on a short-term, part-time basis to support children involved in the fires.

Without specific knowledge of how bushfire experiences impacted children, and unable to identify any local mentors, I approached our library and asked them to search for any publications that might help us. A total of 8 related papers, all from overseas, were found, but none directly addressed children caught in a disaster such as a bushfire.

In the mid-1980s, there were no formal structures for recovery. As a result of my experience with, and passion for, outreach services, we engaged with early childhood development centres, kindergartens, and primary and secondary schools to understand the experience of their children and families. We listened to what staff and parents were saying and drew on our theoretical knowledge and clinical practice experience to gain insight into, and understanding of, what was unfolding.

We focused on working to understand how the damaging impact of being caught in the fires was affecting the children, their families, and community. At the same time, we were working to understand the myriad challenging consequences that emerged through the recovery period for individuals and the community.

We sought to identify capacities supporting resilience and how to help children, parents, and teachers draw upon them and manage their own recovery. A learning challenge, and consequent skill to develop, was knowing when and how to help – and when not to get in the way.

As a result of working in the Macedon community, we visited the Australian Counter Disaster College to see if they could help raise awareness of the psychosocial impacts of the fires. They asked us to present our evolving knowledge to their courses. Doone Robertson, the first editor of the newly launched The Macedon Digest, asked us to develop the series of 9 articles that were published in consecutive editions over 2 years. It was a testament to the leadership of the College – which was focused on civil defence in the Cold War period – that it learned and adapted accordingly.

At the time, we didn't know whether the papers had an impact, but we continued to be invited to present on the courses over many years, and also contributed to the early handbooks on the subject. In 2006, on the 20th anniversary of the Australian Journal of Emergency Management (AJEM), we were asked to write a reflections paper on what we had learned in the preceding 20 years.

In 1996, I wrote a paper for the journal titled, *'Women in Disaster Management: Where are they?'*. This paper explored the disparity of tasks, roles, and responsibilities between women and men in the emergency sector, including staff volunteer numbers, access to training at the Australian Emergency Management Institute, recognition through honours and awards, and leadership positions. Women were seen as the sandwich makers. In those days, it was tough for the handful of women working in the emergency field, as we were not seen to have authority or expertise of value to contribute, even though we were acknowledged and sought as experts in our respective areas. In this environment, I learned not to give up but to be clear and committed to the goals I was trying to achieve. I also recognised that these attitudes were not personally directed at me, but were embedded in the prevailing cultural context. This helped me to persist and remain for
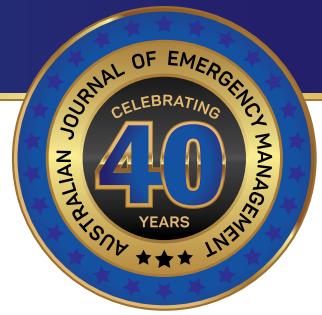
the long haul. I reflected in the closing paragraphs of the paper:

Participation of women in emergency management would expand the official emergency management agenda beyond bridges and dollars (to put it crudely) into the other real world of nurturing, caring, and psychological and social functioning.

I hinted, perhaps, towards a better system which I now see firmly established, but with progress still to be made.

Recently, when I revisited the initial articles, I found that they remain strong foundational pieces. What has advanced over the years is our understanding of the human brain and of how children develop and function neurologically.

The principles of the impact of disasters and the recovery processes discussed in the articles still apply. These include a community-centred and careful understanding of the individual, whether infant, child, adolescent, or adult; acknowledgement of and response to the disruption across some or many aspects of people's lives and the communities in which they live, work, or recreate; and the impacts on workers.

I also noticed that we did not use the word trauma in the articles. I consider that we have arrived at a stage where for many people, any events that are worrying, demanding, or stressful are described as traumatic. I wonder if we overuse the word in much of our discourse and risk losing its meaning: damage to any part of a person's being or community.

Over the years since these articles were published, there has been much needed, comprehensive, and skilled development of knowledge, services, and trained personnel. However, I continue to see reinventions of the wheel, disaster after disaster. In the best interests of the impacted people and communities, taking the time to review existing evidence – such as accessing articles in AJEM – prevents the waste of resources, and supports timely and quality service delivery.

AJEM is an important resource, as it is the primary source in Australia and the region for sharing knowledge across emergency management systems.

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