The Australian Journal of Emergency Management (1996–2005): themes from the second decade

John Richardson

Executive Director,
Australian Institute for
Disaster Resilience

'I mean, can you imagine anybody taking a copy of The Australian Journal of Emergency Management with them to bed for night-time reading' quips Nicholas Kanarev (Vol 11/1, 1996) of the second decade of the *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* (AJEM). 'It's all gloom and doom.' The line is funny, but it also captures the journal's early seriousness and sets up how much the field broadened and matured over the following decade.

Across 1996–2005, AJEM shows a clear shift from practice notes toward stronger theoretical foundations and more complex problems: AIIMS, quality and risk management, volunteer management, risk communication, land-use planning, and (increasingly) community engagement. The first peer-reviewed paper appears in Volume 12, Issue 4 (1997) and the journal consistently features internationally themed contributions from authors outside Australia.

Several papers from this period strongly shaped my own thinking for Red Cross' Emergency REDiPlan. Handmer's *We are all vulnerable* in (Vol 18/3, 2003) helped shift the frame from deficits to strengths and resilience. Paton, Smith and Johnston's *When good intentions turn bad* in (Vol 20/1, 2005) distilled a practical truth – connected communities are prepared communities – that later informed the message 'Know your neighbours'. Morrissey and Reser (Vol 18/2, 2003) added an under-discussed dimension: psychological preparedness as a legitimate part of readiness.

The information age arrives late in the 1990s. McRae (Vol 11/4, 1996) predicts the World Wide Web will overtake fax as a source of weather and warning information. Fischer (Vol 14/3, 1999) flags the prospect of 'a potential new form of disaster' arising from large-scale computer system failure. McKinnon (Vol 13/3, 1998) captures the anxiety of the Millennium Bug – widely feared as a community-wide electronic threat, though it ultimately passed with little disruption.

Risk management becomes a dominant thread. Koob (Vol 11/2, 1996) sets the context, while Smith et al. (Vol 11/2, 1996) apply the risk management standard to community risk management. Later, Godber (Vol 20/3, 2005) examines tensions between local government, developers and residents over what counts as 'acceptable' flood risk.

Risk is also treated as social and contested. Young (Vol 13/2, 1998) argues perceptions of risk vary widely; Barnes (Vol 17/1, 2002) explores the community meanings that sit behind those perceptions. One implication is ethical as much as technical:

> *People can evacuate their homes as a cyclone approaches or choose to take part in certain hazardous activities, but they cannot avoid the results of another person's decisions.*

Yates (Vol 14/2, 1999) offers a pointed warning about leadership capacity:

> *Although the emergency services are good at developing good transactional leaders skilled in their specific craft, their structure and culture tends to limit the development of transformational leaders with broad outlooks and breadth of experience. The absence of this aspect of leadership can limit the ability of emergency service organisations to cope with a rapidly changing environment.*

Volunteerism is a persistent focus, culminating in Volume 20's special themed edition on volunteers. Topics range from legal aspects for their protection (Eburn Vol 18/4, 2003) to the relationship of volunteers and building

social capital (Fahey Vol 18/4, 2003). Reinholdt (Vol 14/4, 1999) identifies demographic challenges facing volunteer management that sound all too familiar: 'Factors such as population growth, rural and urban mobility, and increasing cultural diversity present challenges to service providers. These factors increase the demands for, and the complexities of, service delivery by volunteers, and create complex management issues.'

Case studies also illustrate a growing 'partnerships' approach. The Berri example (Pisanello et al. Vol 17/2, 2002) show community leaders engaged in emergency risk management planning, while Dovers (Vol 19/1, 2004) connects sustainability and disaster management through shared challenges such as uncertainty, integration across social – environmental – economic policy, and inter-agency coordination.

The 'prevention, preparedness, response and recovery' paradigm is repeatedly questioned. Tarrant (Vol 12/4, 1997) asks what a 'prepared community' actually means; Kelly (Vol 14/3, 1999) highlights the non-linear complexity of disasters; and Cronstedt (Vol 17/2, 2002) calls the dominant model outdated.

Governance and law become more prominent. Sarre and Doig (Vol 15/3, 2000) argue corporate recklessness can be a disaster driver and that risk considerations belong in governance structures. Dunlop (Vol 19/1, 2004) notes emergency service organisations operate in a far more legally complex environment than a decade earlier. Taylor (Vol 18/1, 2003) considers terrorism and corporate malfeasance within disaster classification, cautioning against losing context when analysing traumatic events.

'The recklessness, or reckless indifference, of corporate entities, often causes disasters' opens Sarre and Doig's paper (Vol 15/3, 2000) on the importance of embedding disaster risk considerations into corporate governance structures. 'A decade ago, emergency service organisations ("ESOs") were rarely sued, rarely questioned and rarely thought to be affected by legislation such as Occupational Health and Safety Acts. Today the situation is infinitely more complicated' writes Dunlop in her review of legal issues (Vol 19/1, 2004). Taylor (Vol 18/1, 2003) looks at how complex terrorism and corporate malfeasance could be brought into the classification of disasters. He cautions, 'In times of turbulence there is much to be said for putting traumatic events in appropriate context before considering their features in detail.'

Surprisingly, the first examination of warnings arises in 2002 with Pfister's paper (Vol 17/2, 2002) on the failure of warnings in Grafton. Warnings are revisited by Betts in Victoria (Vol 18/3, 2003), and by Molino et al. (Vol 17/2, 2002) in the Hawkesbury Nepean in NSW. In an alternative view, Kanarev (Vol 11/3, 1996) gives us an amusing tour through novel disaster prediction methods, including televisions, onions, and pets acting strangely. He channels his inner Fox Mulder:

> *It is unfortunate that science has hijacked the debate about what is and what is not acceptable material for study in emergency management. As a consequence, phenomena deemed paranormal has been ostracised to the periphery of scientific inquiry.*

This decade also sees the emergence of community safety and the shift from information to engagement. Neilsen and Lidstone (Vol 13/3, 1998) seek to underpin this in educational theory. Papers on cyclone awareness in schools in North Queensland (Berry and King Vol 12/2, 1998), fire awareness in Tasmania (Butters Vol 12/2, 1998), and the CFA's Bushfire Blitz street corner approach to community engagement in Victoria (Hill Vol 12/2, 1998).

Attention to economics and policy sharpens. Gentle et al. (Vol 16/2, 2001) outline the costs of disasters in Australia. The groundbreaking work arose out of a need to put the value of mitigation expenditure on a sounder footing than had previously been the case. Cost sharing policies, particularly the forerunner of the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements, comes under significant scrutiny on the lack of betterment provisions (Smith Vol 12/3, 1997) and the states for onerous requirements from the Australian Government (Gabriel Vol 12/1, 1997).

A notable expansion is the explicit focus on values beyond life and property. Spennerman (Vol 11/1, 1996) outlines the unnecessary loss of highly valuable cultural heritage resulting from the unintended consequences of well-intentioned mitigation measures. Volume 14, Issue 3 (1999) was focused on ecological disasters, recognising that emergency management is broader than 'life and property'. Dovers and Handmer (Vol 14/2, 1999) define 'ecological emergencies' as sudden-onset events where the subject is non-human, such as biological diversity, an ecosystem, a species, or a river system. Somewhat presciently, one of the papers examines the issue of Blue Green Algal blooms (Whittington Vol 14/3, 1999) – an early signal of environmental risk as a mainstream emergency management concern.

On considering values, trade-offs and decision making, Britton (Vol 16/4, 2001) quotes Dennis Mileti's clear eye critique:

> *Until people are ready to address the inter-dependent root causes of disasters and to do the difficult work of coming to negotiated consensus about which losses are acceptable, which are unacceptable, and what type of action to take, communities will continue a path toward ever-larger natural disasters. Part of the unlearning process requires people to be comfortable with shifting from 'disasters as acts of god' to 'disasters as acts of human intervention'.*

Local government emerges as central, as seen in Wapling's account of the 1993 Northeast Victorian floods (Vol 11/2, 1996) and later discussion of councils' roles in municipal emergency planning (Gabriel Vol 18/2, 2003).

Equity themes begin to surface more clearly. Wraith (Vol 11/4, 1996) bluntly asks, 'Where are all the women?', as gender and disaster impacts start to be treated as relevant to emergency management practice and research.

Emerging and novel topics include Drabek's piece on tourists in disasters, Salibury's paper on the anthrax outbreak in Victoria, and blue green algae. This interesting paper from Fletcher (Vol 17/1, 2002) examines impacts on residents 2 years on from storms in Wollongong in 1998. It is interesting for 2 reasons; the first being the first longer term impact presented, and the other being a study of a storm, an oft neglected subject. Exotic animal diseases, which received significant attention in the first decade of AJEM, is again featured in a themed Volume 9, Issue 3 (2004). The NSW Hailstorm in 1999 receives significant attention with Keys (Vol 14/4, 1999) examining the response, and Yeo et al. (Vol 14/4, 1999) examining the impacts and costs.

The psychosocial impacts of disasters are profiled throughout the decade, with a number of papers that consider the Port Arthur Tragedy (Harper Vol 12/1, 1997), the challenges of sensitively managing Disaster Victim Identification (Eyres Vol 17/1, 2002), the impact of trauma on journalists (MacMahon Vol 16/2, 2001), and Bryant's paper (Vol 14/2, 1999) on acute distress disorder as a predictor of post traumatic stress disorder.

Recovery also features significantly with Volume 13 (1998) featuring several papers, papers on Port Arthur, and special themed edition based upon the New Zealand Recovery Symposium, featuring a great array of recovery luminaries from the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. Eyres, Coles, Buckle, Gordon, Coghlan, Norman are among the names (Vol 19/4, 2004). Eyres (Vol 14/3, 1999) provides us with the first examination of the importance of post disaster rituals and symbols in recovery.

Landslides in Australia have deadly outcomes. Leiba et al. (Vol 12/1, 1998) outline the deadly nature of landslides in Australia. Shortly after this was published, the tragic Thredbo disaster occurs. The first 12 months of recovery is detailed by Dawe (Vol 14/1, 1999): 'Most people thought that the community and its individuals would be substantially recovered within weeks, apart from the grieving of friends and relatives. … The reality has been more difficult.'

The concept of vulnerability and resilience emerges strongly across this decade. Buckle (Vol 13/4, 1999) refines community vulnerability. Buckle, Smale and Marsh (Vol 18/2, 2003) reframe risk to what is important to communities, and not agencies. King and McGregor (Vol 15/3, 2000) give us the first examination of the use of social indicators to determine social vulnerability. People with a disability are recognised as a neglected topic in emergency management and research (Parr Vol 12/4, 1997). The conclusion pulls no punches:

> *The continued failure of disaster mitigation policy to target the needs of persons with disabilities constitutes a serious violation of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.*

Multicultural communities also receive their first attention in 2003, with Mitchell's (Vol 18/1) paper on guidelines for emergency managers.

Yates (Vol 12/3, 1997) implores closer cooperation between Aboriginal affairs and the disaster mitigation policy communities. 'In particular, the disaster mitigation policy community needs to become engaged with the frameworks established to coordinate service provision to remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.' The Skertchlys (Vol 14/4, 1999) firmly place traditional Aboriginal knowledge at the centre of their paper:

> *The assured, direct and simple, renewable and enduring, traditional Aboriginal approaches to natural hazard counter-disaster capabilities, contrast markedly with many present by lifeline and hazard mitigation features and frailties integral to the complex, interlocking, advanced Western services, resources and infra-structure systems, upon which Information Age High Technology Human Settlements are now so critically dependent for survival.*

In Queensland, McLachlan's study (Vol 18/1, 2003) shows how understanding Indigenous communities' coping mechanisms can lead to better disaster management strategies. Hocke and O'Brien (Vol 18/2) also visit this theme of strengthening community capacity. Newman and Smith (Vol 19/1, 2004) detail Western Australia's approach to integrating risk management in remote Aboriginal communities.

And finally, the decade ends with Volume 20, Issue 4 (2005), *Notes from the Field: Australian Forward Assessment Team: Trip to Washington DC, USA* and a photo of the author of this piece, holding his 2 young daughters on return at the airport. He can no longer lift these 2 up in his arms.

