

## The mental health impact of bushfires on community members missing in the Final Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry recommendations

Dear Sir,

The Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry into the 2019–20 bushfires<sup>1</sup> failed to recognise the mental health impacts on the people in affected communities. The 2019–20 bushfires are considered one of the worst recorded in Australian history. The inquiry rightly identified the significant mental health impact of the bushfires on the firefighters and first responders. These individuals are exposed to significant hazards in their attempts to protect the land and communities. Their health and well-being is of the utmost importance. The disappointment is that the report includes several references to the physical health effects to communities exposed to the smoke from bushfires, with no reference to the mental health impact on those that have lost loved ones, their homes and/or their livelihood.

It is well-established that natural disasters have a profound and long-lasting impact on mental health and social functioning, with emphasis on outcomes such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and substance abuse. Following the 2009 Victorian bushfires, up to 26 percent of the impacted communities were experiencing mental health problems two to three years after the event, decreasing to 21.9 percent after five years.<sup>2</sup> Fear for one's life and loss of a loved one in the fires were predictors of poor mental health. The devastating impacts of

2019–20 bushfires on mental health is no different and based on previous studies of bushfire impact on individuals, responses are likely to be diverse, ranging from optimism to absolute despair. It is normal for individuals to be angry, frustrated, distressed and anxious after these types of events. Many individuals may be so impacted they go on to experience longer lasting consequences such as post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and complicated grief reactions that unless treated appropriately can lead to a heightened risk of suicide. It is also possible for people living in areas not reached by the bushfires to be affected as a result of ongoing media images presenting the extent of the devastation and loss of human and animal life.

Some people are particularly at-risk of natural disasters. They may have already experience unique challenges, including socio-economic and rural disadvantage, and pre-existing mental and physical illness, that may impact their ability to cope with and recover from catastrophic events such as bushfires. Indigenous peoples in Australia are also particularly vulnerable given their strong connections to country and decimation of that land brings a profound sense of loss. This loss ultimately affects the mental health and well-being of these communities, who have strong connections to the land.

It is no use talking about recovery unless we are prepared to publicly acknowledge that the bushfires have left an ongoing devastating impact on the mental health of affected communities. The Report of the NSW Bushfire Inquiry should have made at least one recommendation on this issue.

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## Self-reported influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on poisoning presentations to an Australian toxicology service

Dear Sir,

Whilst Australia continues to realise the ongoing ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, little is known regarding the impact of lockdowns, border closures and other restrictions on the epidemiology of overdose.

**Table 1. Self-reported influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on overdose cases**

	<b>Participants, n (%).</b>
	<b>Total n = 91</b>
<b>Overdose intent - Suicide</b>	59 (65)
– seeking help	19 (21)
– recreational	1 (1)
– unsure	12 (13)
– Employed pre-COVID-19 pandemic	42 (46)
<b>COVID-19 related contributing factors:</b>	
– unemployment	19 (21)
– social isolation/loneliness	64 (70)
– cancellation of plans/events	20 (22)
– bereavement	2 (2)
– anxiety	52 (57)
– domestic stressors	25 (27)
– personal illness	12 (13)
– access to mental health services	29 (32)
– depression	66 (73)
<b>Mental health deterioration secondary to COVID-19 pandemic</b>	70 (77)
<b>Pre-COVID-19 pandemic overdose ideation</b>	60 (66)

These have all lead to widespread personal, social and economic consequences. The state of Victoria has endured some of the toughest and lengthy restrictions, even by global standards. The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the motivation behind a medication or substance-related overdose.

This was a prospective study administering a questionnaire to patients presenting with overdose and referred to the Monash Toxicology unit at Monash Health in Victoria, Australia. The study was undertaken from 1 April to 30 November 2020 and encompassed the second COVID-19 wave in Victoria and associated 112-day lockdown period. The study was approved by the Monash Health Research Ethics Committee.

Ninety-one patients were interviewed covering key questions on intent of overdose and influence of the COVID-19 pandemic. Data are summarised in Table 1. The median age was 25 years (IQR 17,43) and the majority of participants were female

( $n = 64$ , 70%). All patients ( $n = 91$ ) survived their drug overdose. The medication most commonly taken in overdose was paracetamol ( $n = 22$ , 24%).

The most frequent response for how the pandemic impacted individual circumstances was social isolation ( $n = 64$ , 70%). Nineteen (21%) participants stated job loss due to the pandemic was a contributing factor in their reason to overdose. Fifty-two participants (57%) identified themselves as suffering from anxiety and 66 (73%) with depression. Seventy (77%) felt their mental health had deteriorated as a result of the pandemic. Sixty-five (71%) participants identified the COVID-19 pandemic as a contributing factor in their motivation for deliberate self-poisoning overdose, despite no patients being diagnosed with COVID-19. Thirty-one (34%) participants had not considered self-poisoning prior to the pandemic. The median length of hospital stay for treatment of overdose was one day (IQR 1,2) and the

median length of stay if requiring subsequent mental health admission, was an additional one day (IQR 1,2).

In Australia, there have been multiple lockdowns associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. What is less clear is how the motivation for self-poisoning has been influenced by the pandemic situation in many Australians. One study from the US reported an increase in 43% of overdose calls to emergency medical services related to social isolation and stay-at-home orders.<sup>1</sup>

In this study, two-thirds of participants stated that suicide was the intention of their overdose. Multiple factors relating to the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the rationale for taking a medication overdose; however, the most common were social isolation, followed by anxiety and mood disorder. Two-thirds of the cohort had a mental health history characterised by thoughts of self-harm prior to the pandemic, but importantly one-third had never previously considered suicide or self-harm by overdose prior to the pandemic.

#### Disclosure

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