RACGP
Royal Australian College *of* General Practitioners

Emergency planning and response in general practice

Fact sheet: Extreme weather in Australia

Heatwaves

The Australian Climate Council has predicted that:[1]

- heatwaves will become longer, hotter and will occur more often
- extreme heat will increase across the entire continent
- by 2030, the annual average temperature in Australia will increase by 0.6 –1.3°C with inland Australia experiencing the greatest increases in average temperatures.

Mortality directly relating to heatwaves can be difficult to measure as deaths can be related to an exacerbation of existing chronic medical conditions as well as direct heat related illness. However, heatwaves undoubtedly have an impact on increased morality. During the January 2009 heatwave in Victoria, there were 374 more deaths than the mean number for the previous 5 years.[3]

Storms

The Australian Climate Council has found that:[2]

- climate change is fueling more intense and damaging storms in Australia, including storm surges associated with tropical cyclones and east coast lows
- climate change exacerbates coastal flooding both from intensifying coastal storms and higher sea levels
- climate change will continue to exacerbate storms in Australia, increasing the risk of devastating effects.

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The role of general practice

General practice plays a significant role in the community's overall response to extreme weather events, including heatwaves and storms. The RACGP has developed a number of resources to support general practices with preparing for, responding to and recovering from the impacts of emergencies, such as heatwaves, and storms. Access the resources here http://www.racgp.org.au/your-practice/business/tools/disaster/emergencies/.

People in rural and remote locations and people who are more vulnerable (such as the elderly, people with disabilities, people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds and people with mental health issues) might need assistance prior to, during or after an extreme weather event. It is important that communities are connected to, are knowledgeable about and supportive of their vulnerable members. Some strategies for supporting community cohesion might include:

- creating a list of patients in the local area who might be vulnerable in the event of an extreme weather event (you could use a data extraction tool to identify at risk patients)
- using text message alerts to provide patients with information about what to do at certain stages of an emergency
- forming relationships with other health organisations (hospitals, community health centres etc.) to coordinate and clarify roles in the event of an extreme weather event
- ensuring the practice's emergency response plan, including key contacts, is up to date and ready to be implemented if necessary.

Tips for you, your staff and your patients in extreme heat

- Drink plenty of water
- Keep your body cool
- Keep your house cool
- Keep your food safe
- Stay safe in the sun
- Stay tuned for instructions from emergency services authorities (such as to evacuate)

Tips for you, your staff and your patients in storm activity

- Remain indoors if possible
- Close doors and windows
- Stay away from windows
- Unplug appliances (radio, television, and computers)
- Keep away from water and objects that conduct electricity
- Stay tuned for instructions from emergency services authorities (such as to evacuate)

Resources

Victorian Government Better Health Channel, *Heat stress and heat related illness* https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/heat-stress-and-heat-related-illness

NSW Government, *Beat the heat: Information for health professionals* http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/beattheheat/Pages/information-for-health-professionals.aspx

healthdirect – *Hot weather risks and staying cool* https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/hot-weather-risks-and-staying-cool

Australasian College for Emergency Medicine, *Heat health resource for emergency departments*, https://acem.org.au/getmedia/6de4a5d0-5308-4049-91df-2d306b392612/Heat_Health_Resource_v2-3.aspx

Bureau of Meteorology – *Severe Thunderstorm Safety Tips* http://www.bom.gov.au/nsw/sevwx/safety_tips.shtml

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1. Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2007, Splash ABC, Accessed 13 January 2017 https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/cranking-intensity-report
2. Australian Climate Council 2016, Super-charged storms in Australia: The influence of climate change, accessed 13 January 2017 from https://www.climatecouncil.org.au/stormsreport
3. Victorian Government Department of Human Service 2012, January 2009 heatwave in victoria: An assessment of health impacts, accessed 12 July 2017 from https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/getfile?sc_itemid=%7B78C32CE8-A619-47A6-8ED1-1C1D34566326%7D

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