

Response to Questions on Notice from Senator Watt

Senator WATT: I have just a couple of questions. You've both talked a bit about the compounding impact of COVID on the mental health of people who went through the bushfires earlier this year as well. I'm just interested in knowing a little bit more about that and particularly what impact COVID has had on your organisations' ability to deliver services to bushfire victims.

Prof. Christensen: I think there's much evidence in the literature to show that multiple trauma is much more likely to result in psychological distress than just a single trauma. So the more that we have the more likely the impact is going to be greater. We have been working, as a result of our workforce development programs, with bushfire firefighters and first responders. We have some recent new work that we're undertaking particularly directed at bushfire firefighters. We've also got specific mental health apps for first responders. So we are working with ambulance people and firefighters to specifically look at their health.

Senator WATT: Just on the funding that's been provided to you to assist first responders, where is that funding up to now? Have services now been delivered or are we still at an intermediate stage?

Prof. Christensen: I think we received that funding in July. Much of it is around looking after first responders and their families through educational programs. There certainly has been a lot of activity in building specific programs for those particular groups. I can't tell you exactly where it's up to, but I can certainly provide you with that information later.

Senator WATT: That would be great if you could, thanks. And Beyond Blue?

There is substantial research evidence suggesting that the mental health impacts of trauma are cumulative. For example, amongst Australian fire fighters we have shown that rates of mental disorders like depression or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) gradually increase as cumulative trauma exposure builds across many consecutive years (see figure 1).

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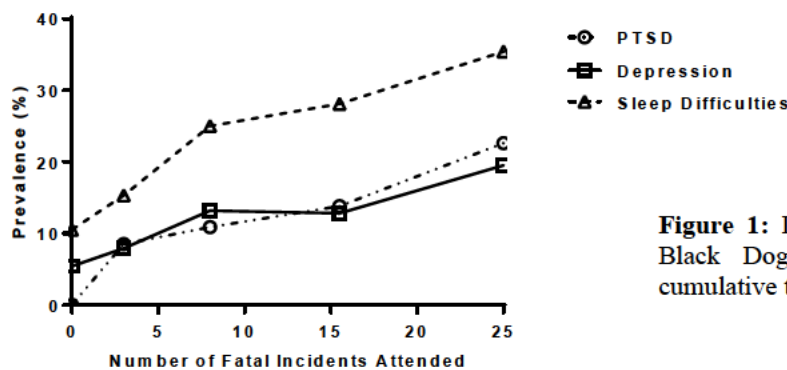


Figure 1: Data from a study undertaken by the Black Dog Institute showing the impact of cumulative trauma amongst fire fighters (N=753)

Consistent with our findings, research conducted in the aftermath of the 2009 Black Saturday Bushfires, exhibited rates of PTSD and depression in impacted communities were two times greater when individuals had suffered additional major life stressors in the months following the fires.² COVID-19 constitutes a significant life event for many, it is not only creating economic hardship for many communities impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires but is also adding to social isolation.

¹ Harvey *et al* (2016). *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol 50(7) 649-658.

² Bryant *et al* (2014). *Australian & New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Vol. 48(7) 634-643.

The Black Dog Institute and Fortem Australia Limited received funding from the Department of Home Affairs in July 2020 to establish new mental health support services for first responders and their families within the areas impacted by the 2019/20 bushfires. The funding was provided to create a range of pathways for first responders and their families and to ensure that when individuals use these pathways, they are rapidly linked with evidence-based mental health care that is appropriate for their type and severity of symptoms.

Black Dog Institute is currently designing and developing an integrated platform for workers and families to undergo self-assessment and self-management, along with smartphone solutions including evidence-based strategies for PTSD and common mental health disorders, to be launched progressively from November 2020. An initial version of the online platform has been available from July, more detail can be found [here](#). This provides bushfire victims with the option to seek help either using traditional pathways (their GPs) or via a new anonymous service (the new online clinical assessment).

We're delivering a pilot training program for GPs and healthcare workers in September 2020 with the full program being rolled out to all states and territories from October 2020 – December 2021. This will enable local GPs to recognise post-traumatic symptoms in their patients. Clinical psychologist-delivered mental health support – are being undertaken at Black Dog Clinic and the UNSW Traumatic Stress Clinic.