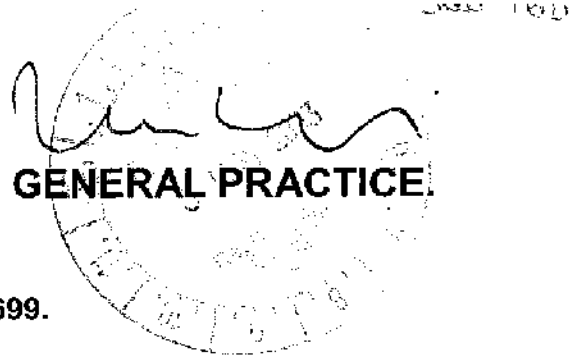


# **NORTH EAST VICTORIAN DIVISION OF GENERAL PRACTICE**

**P.O. Box 75,  
Mount Beauty. Vic. 3699.**



## **Submission to Federal House of Representatives Committee on Recent Australian Bushfires**

The North East Victorian Division of General Practice (NEVDGP) is a federally funded general practice support body, servicing the 110 GPs in the "Hume" region of North East Victoria. These 110 GP members are working in some 30 Practices located in 18 towns with a defined boundary.

Bushfires in January / February 2003 impacted on communities including general practitioners in the communities of:

- Corryong
- Walwa
- Tallangatta (Mitta-Mitta)
- Yackandandah
- Beechworth
- Chiltern
- Mount Beauty (Tawonga & Falls Creek)
- Myrtleford
- Bright (Mount Hotham)

These extensive fires, called Pinnibar complex, Bogong complex, Buffalo and Beechworth directly affected 30 of our GP members who provided medical services to the above mentioned towns.

Most of these GPs reported a 20-30% income reduction over the period the bushfires were active. In addition to this financial affect many of these GPs faced lengthy periods of fire threat to their homes and practice buildings.

There is an unmeasurable psychological effect (and to some even a possible post traumatic stress disorder) from such fires, doctors, in common with most others in these communities and the many fire fighters, are at a potential risk with this disorder.

During the bushfires the NEVDGP provided a significant support role for non affected towns to "cover" emergency services when local GPs were more concerned in protecting their own families, homes and even practice buildings. The NEVDGP via our workforce officer and regular fax sheets was able to perform these roles.

The many local and regional disaster plans swung into action to combat these fires seemed to make little or no reference of importance to ongoing GP services to such affected communities. Thus the NEVDGP has a number of broad suggestions to make to your committee.

1. The potential role of local Divisions of general practice in support to disaster affected communities needs to be recognised and promulgated in Regional and Municipal disaster planning. Divisions are an ideal vehicle to mobilise private general practitioners in such times where medical needs may be increased.
2. The roles of Divisions of General Practice and relationships of general practice to combating authorities such as Police, Fire and Ambulance needs to be better defined in all existing community and state disaster plans.
3. An economic effect of disaster such as the recent fires is a consideration to the commonwealth when it impacts so significantly on a portion of the private sector such as rural general practice.
4. Development of post disaster counselling and debriefing from volunteers and disaster combating authorities and their employed personal needs to be appropriately funded and planned with a view to prevention of post traumatic stress disorder where possible.

The NEVDGP is particularly concerned with agenda items (a), (g) and (j) in the commonwealths call for submissions. We will be making a more comprehensive submission and response to the "Office of the Emergency Services Commissioners" Victorian Bushfire Inquiry 2003.

The NEVDGP would welcome any opportunity to enhance the draft points we have highlighted in this brief submission.



Dr. J.M. Robinson  
Medical Director NEVDGP  
8/5/2003

## **Medical Director's Report to NEVDGP Board of Management meeting 26/02/03**

2003 began chaotically with a massive bushfire commencing after lightening strikes on 7<sup>th</sup> of January.

These Bogong, Pinnibar (Corryong) and Buffalo fire complexes plus additional fires near Beechworth and Yackandandah have caused considerable disruption to normal life and activities in the towns Corryong, Walwa, Tallangatta, Beechworth, Yackandandah, Mount Beauty, Falls Creek, Myrtleford and Bright, impacting significantly on GP resources and services in those towns. With my own practices in Mount Beauty and Falls Creek fire burnt to within 50 metres of both our practice premises. Many member GP's faced personal crisis with threats to homes and practices.

The fires dragged on over a 5 week course with intense smoke and additional concerns such as water quality stressing all of these communities. The division office, located near Mount Beauty was also affected as our workers battled with individual and family issues associated with the fires. Offers of support from medical colleagues both within and surrounding the division were immense, all doctors were grateful for the expressions of support. In Bright where a number of our Doctor Members' homes were threatened the division played a significant role in support, locum provision etc enabling continuity of medical services to that community.

Special thanks must go to Yarrawonga GP's Clyde Ronan and Gordon Taylor who came out to cover services. Regional Medical Displan Medical Co-ordinator Dr Paul Kelly kept a close liaison with assistant AMC's Graham McCallum, Myself and Richard Barkus, fortunately there was little threat to life and only a few minor casualties amongst fire personal and a few individuals who fell from roves of houses during fire prevention activities. It was good to see these support networks in action, much improved on pre-division days.

During the 5 weeks of fires all tourists were discouraged from remaining or visiting these towns, many young families temporarily left the region and many old folk were removed to safety by distant families. People remained indoors out of the intense persistent smoke leaving a rather ghostly appearance in these normally frantic tourist towns. There were however massive influxes of fire-fighting personal and associated support services. As result all general practices in these towns have experienced a **significant down turn in income** in addition to wearing through what was a most stressful, threatening time.

The NEVDGP will have an ongoing role in recovery and support of rural general practice services throughout these towns in our areas. Sadly this aspect has been neglected by regional offices of the department of Human Services with NEVDGP not being invited to regional disaster recovery meetings. This will be a further area of future work for David and myself in rebuilding our communications with the Hume regional office.

**Mark Robinson**  
**26/02/2003**

**Dundas, Ian (REPS)**

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**From:** David Dart [daviddart@nevicdgp.org.au]  
**Sent:** Thursday, 8 May 2003 4:39 PM  
**To:** Committee, Bushfires (REPS)  
**Cc:** Mark Robinson  
**Subject:** North East Victorian Division of General Practice.

Please find attached a submission prepared on behalf of the North East Victorian Division of General Practice.

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