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Secretary
Dept of Parliamentary Services

Ms Hilary Penfold QC
Secretary
Department of Parliamentary Services
Parliament House
CANBERRA 2600

Dear Ms Penfold

Reference : "Critical but stable: Australia's response to an infectious disease outbreak". 16 November, No3, 2004-2005 ISSN 1449-8464

I write to express my concern over this "research" paper written by staff under the Parliamentary Library letterhead.

There are serious methodological flaws in the research design of the paper primarily over the selection bias of respondents, a lack of applicable survey tool and lack of comprehensive literature review. Respondents seem to have been selected and interviewed by the researchers and opinions are not attributed to them in any particular context. The lack of an acceptable survey tool has also exacerbated this process creating an inconsistency in argument and lack of methodological rigour.

Of the 147 references/footnotes cited, approximately 30% refer to media reports, 20% refer to speeches or inquiries without appropriate contextualisation and approximately 20% refer to legal and historical data (most repeated). Only 8 references (5%) appear to refer to respondents, who are not given appropriate attribution. I note that no person currently sitting on the Australian Health Disaster Management Policy Committee was a "respondent".

In addition there appears to be no tangible attempt to review the international literature in regard to infectious disease emergencies, bioterrorism or emergency planning. Only a small number of peer-reviewed journals are analysed and apart from a reference to the EMA and the Canberra Hospital bush-fire response, none refer to emergency planning arrangements.

Flawed methodology results in incorrect results and conclusions.

For your information, the NSW Government established a Counter Disaster Unit in February 2003 and funding has been provided of more than \$17 million over 5 years and this unit has been responsible for detailed contingency planning at both the jurisdictional and national level. Unfortunately, the researchers failed to acknowledge or appreciate the level of detailed work

undertaken by the NSW Government, which includes contingency planning in regard to infectious diseases and bioterrorism. This particularly applies to the NSW Health Task Force on SARS recommendations and implementation.

In addition, comments in regard to bed availability in NSW hospitals (p21-28) fail to appreciate the activation of whole of health emergency contingency operations in the event of major incidents and disasters. The simplistic notions of perceived lack of workforce and intensive care capability demonstrates how the authors were unaware of, or failed to appreciate, how the jurisdictions have robust disaster contingency plans, co-ordinated through whole of government state operations centres. In addition, the cursory acknowledgment of the "national burn plan" (AUSBURNPLAN) also failed to understand the national arrangements in place in a mass casualty incident, which was indeed tested during Exercise Explorer, held in Sydney in May 2004.

NSW Health also continues to work closely and co-operatively with the Australian Government in regard to all forms of counter-disaster planning, including infectious disease emergencies and bioterrorism.


Unfortunately papers such as this, with significant metaphor and hyperbole, are reported in the media as "fact" ¹, particularly when given the imprimatur of Parliamentary Library "research". The negative impression of counter-disaster preparedness communicated by this paper also creates unnecessary community anxiety.

The management of health counter-disaster and counter-terrorism contingencies are of such importance that decisions should be based on international best practice and evidenced-based principles not the personal opinion of a small number of "respondents" selected by the study authors without any consistency in survey method and from media reports.

Unfortunately, this paper is so flawed in both its methodology and conclusions that it should be withdrawn without delay.

For your information and action.

Yours sincerely


DR GREG STEWART
Deputy Director General, Population Health
and Chief Health Officer

25/11/04

¹ The Australian, November 16, 2004
Hospitals 'at risk' in outbreak
Patricia Karvelas