

## Special Issue Editorial: First International Conference on People in Disasters

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### Abstract

*The first International People in Disasters Conference was held in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, from 24 to 26 February 2016. The conference showcased the dilemmas of living and working within a disaster context, and best practice approaches to response and recovery. The Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, particularly the earthquake of 22 February 2011, were the disasters of most interest to delegates. Key messages driving this conference were: that people's narratives are healing; to learn from lessons of past disasters; that human-animal bonds are important; to trust each other; that shared leadership and decision-making works best; that ethnic minorities contribute to a holistic response and recovery; that long-term mental health care is required; and to transform to a new future. These key messages were embedded in the conference themes: response, recovery, and resilience. New insight was provided on the value of community and cultural groups as first responders. The significant role of community responses after the Christchurch Earthquake led to Aotearoa/New Zealand's Ministry of Social Development revising its disaster policy to support community initiatives. Other important topics included: 1) diminished psychosocial wellbeing, 2) treatments for disaster-related mental illness, 3) initiatives that have empowered the psychosocial recovery of Christchurch's population, and 4) resilient individuals and communities managing their own recovery. This Special Issue includes papers on: caring for companion animals, compassion fatigue of nurses,*

*promoting Māori psychosocial recovery, family violence, managing diabetes post-disaster, comparing community recovery projects in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Japan, wellbeing of older people, and posttraumatic growth. As Guest Editors for this special edition, we are delighted with the results of the conference and hope that the following papers will be useful to researchers and practitioners working in the fields of disaster response, recovery, and resilience.*

**Keywords:** *Canterbury earthquakes, Australian bushfires and floods, psychosocial wellbeing, mental illness, community response*

The first International People in Disasters Conference was held in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, from 24 to 26 February 2016. This event commemorated the five-year anniversary of traumatic events of 2010 and 2011 throughout Asia Pacific, particularly the Canterbury earthquakes, and Australian bush fires and floods. The earthquake experienced in Christchurch, New Zealand on 22 February 2011 was a specific focus. The conference was unique in that it exhibited stories of people living in affected areas, and stories of workers across health and emergency services. Numerous examples showcased the dilemmas of living and working within a disaster context, and best practice approaches in emergency situations. Key messages driving this event included:

- That people's narratives are healing;
- To learn from lessons of past disasters;
- That human-animal bonds are important;
- To trust each other;
- That shared leadership and decision-making works best;
- That ethnic minorities contribute to a holistic response and recovery;
- That long-term mental health care is required; and
- To transform to a new future.

These key messages were embedded in the conference themes, which covered the three vital elements of community revival after a disaster: response, recovery, and resilience. Community responders and academics provided new insight and understanding about the value of community and cultural groups as first responders during the *heroic* and *honeymoon* phases

of disaster response and recovery, in the initial days and months. Many isolated communities resolved their own requirements for food, freshwater, and sewage disposal in the initial days and weeks following what is commonly referred to as the Christchurch Earthquake, of 22 February 2011. This led Aotearoa/New Zealand's Ministry of Social Development to mandate that future disaster responses must support community initiatives.

During the conference, presentations by researchers and health providers highlighted that in the last five and half years, there has been a significant increase in the numbers of individuals with diminished psychosocial wellbeing - largely caused by disillusionment over delays in insurance settlements over homes, loss of schools, community and sports facilities, and familiar landmarks. Early and late onset mental illness have also been factors within this diminished psychosocial wellbeing. Conference presentations further highlighted a wide range of treatments for disaster-related mental illness, and initiatives that have empowered the psychosocial recovery of the Christchurch population.

Despite the continued struggle after the 2010 and 2011 events, numerous conference presentations highlighted that many people were resilient, or psychologically recovered. These people were reconstructing their lives, and able to take responsibility for their own recovery. Some individuals were described as having experienced posttraumatic growth. At the community level, this has led to rebuild projects.

The Organising Committee received many abstracts for both oral and poster presentations (see Ardagh et al., 2016). Selecting the best fit from a range of great contributions involved a blind peer-review of the abstracts before final decisions were made for the conference and published proceedings.

This Special Issue of the *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies* showcases a selection of papers presented at the People in Disasters Conference. The related presentations were reviewed at the conference, using set criteria, by an international expert who attended the sessions in person. Content that had been previously published was not considered for this special issue. From a further short-list, manuscripts were invited for publication after peer-review. The peer-review process involved participation of prominent scientists and practitioners, many of whom are members of the Researching the Health Implications of Seismic Events (RHISE) Group. The resulting Special Issue includes

papers on: caring for companion animals; compassion fatigue among nurses; promoting Māori psychosocial recovery; family violence; managing diabetes post-disaster; comparing community recovery projects in Aotearoa/New Zealand and Japan; wellbeing of older people; and posttraumatic growth.

Travers, Degeling and Rock (2016) highlight the issues and challenges involved in taking responsibility for pets using case examples from the 2009 Victorian Bushfire Royal Commission. They found that individuals and communities cope better during and after natural disasters when the wellbeing of their pets is planned and provided for. The psychological impact of the Christchurch Earthquake on responders is depicted in the paper by Chung and Davies (2016), on compassion fatigue among nurses. She found that maintaining nurses' wellbeing and patient safety are key components of delivering high quality healthcare, post-disaster. Rawson (2016) describes how the Canterbury District Health Board's Māori health promotion plan, Te Waioratanga, was developed. It successfully promoted Māori psychosocial recovery at family (*whanau*), extended family (*hapū*), and extended tribal group (*iwi*) levels.

Campbell and Jones (2016) describe the development of the Canterbury Family Violence Collaboration, which has raised awareness of the increase in family violence since the Christchurch Earthquake. Su, Lunt and Hoeben (2016) report the results of their study on the impact of the Christchurch Earthquake on insulin-dependent, diabetic patients. They found psychological and family support contributed to good self-management and prevented metabolic complications and hospitalisation. In their paper, Dionisio and Pawson (2016) compare community rebuild and resilience projects in Japan with projects in Aotearoa/New Zealand following the recent disasters experienced in each country. Their findings demonstrate the importance of community initiatives in local and central government disaster recovery projects.

Alpass, Keeling, Stephens and Stevenson (2016) surveyed older persons in Christchurch following the 2011 Christchurch Earthquake. They found that older people generally experienced greater support from family and community, and experienced long-term emotional and economic gains. Smith et al. (2016) investigated posttraumatic growth in a group of relatively resilient individuals who experienced the Canterbury earthquakes, in 2010 and 2011. Their results highlight several important aspects of posttraumatic growth.

As guest editors of this Special Issue, we are delighted with the results of the conference and hope that the following papers will be useful to researchers and practitioners working in the fields of disaster response, recovery, and resilience. The People In Disasters Conference was jointly hosted and organised by the Canterbury District Health Board, and the Canterbury-based RHISE Group. However, many people kindly helped us prepare and organise the conference. We thank the organising committee, key note and invited speakers, scientific committee and reviewers for their comprehensive and timely reviewing of papers, and our sponsors who helped us manage the costs for attending delegates. In addition, we thank the Editors of the *Australasian Journal of Disaster and Trauma Studies* for publishing both the proceedings of the conference, and this Special Issue of selected papers.

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