

# The early days — a management perspective

**A**t the time of the Port Arthur shootings I was manager of Family and Individual Support Services for the Department of Community and Health Services (DC&HS). I have had many years' experience in emergency management as a social worker, manager and lecturer in the Associate Diploma of Emergency Management course that was run, until recently, by the State Emergency Service in conjunction with the University of Tasmania.

In the immediate aftermath of the shootings, the department established a recovery centre on the Tasman Peninsula at the State Emergency Services Headquarters at Nubeena, 15 kilometres from Port Arthur. As the manager of that centre in the first two weeks following the shootings, I found myself relying heavily upon my social work background and training as we worked with the Tasman Peninsula community to meet the challenges and difficulties of the aftermath.

We found that one of the most difficult tasks was to clarify our goals in relation to the recovery effort. We were confronted by a community that had been torn apart by an act of human violence that was difficult to comprehend. As workers, we were as stunned and shocked into disbelief as the rest of the Tasmanian community. Michael White (1997), State Program Coordinator of Child, Family and Community Support, the worker responsible for overall management of the recovery effort describes the task in these words:

'At the outset the Port Arthur response was planned as a broad community recovery activity. There was considerable pressure for the response to the incident to be defined solely as a counselling response; however, initial planning aimed to provide community development as well as counselling services. This was consistent with the view that recovery had to have an explicit community focus in addition to a focus on the well-being of individuals.'<sup>1</sup>

Implicit in the focus on the community development aspects of the response is the notion that community recovery must be managed by the community itself. The role of recover staff is to support the community in making its own decisions about

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how to proceed. This following quote illustrates this point:

'We had been invaded. All those suits from the government sitting around our council table. By the end of the meeting all the suits were at the back of the room and our reps. were sitting at the council table. That's when I knew we were getting some control back over our lives.'<sup>2</sup>

One of the first priorities of the management team at Nubeena was to ensure that the workers involved with recovery efforts understood the broad community focus of the response. This was especially important as the workers in the teams represented a range of professions across eighty different organisations from commonwealth, state, local government and non-government agencies.

Upon arrival, the teams were briefed on the principles underlying the provision of personal services. Their role was to assess the impact of the shootings on the local community, to provide information, advice and support rather than to 'treat' symptoms of trauma. Many workers were anxious and uncertain about their role and the enormity of the task confronting them. It was important to assure them that they did not have to rush into treatment of symptoms, but to assess the impact of the shootings on the community and to be responsive to community needs and expectations. Sometimes, this meant nothing more than 'being there'. This was frustrating for many workers and raised anxiety and stress levels in those who had been keyed up to 'do' something in response to trauma.

The establishment of centres at the Taranna Community Hall and the Eaglehawk Neck Fire Station (located ten and seventeen kilometres respectively from Port Arthur) is an example of the strategies used. These centre were set up in response to strong pressure from the local council and representatives from the communities. There was a feeling amongst local residents

that their needs could best be met by more localised access to services, especially counselling.

The sites attracted very few referrals during the time they operated; however both communities and the council reacted strongly to suggestions that they be closed down. No one in either community had actually expressed a personal need to access services at the two sites, but they were adamant that others in their communities would need them. The communities saw the presence of the centres as a safety net and an expression of the government's concern for their well-being. It did not matter that they were not fully utilised, they were there if people needed them.

Many workers found being assigned to these sites stressful due to low activity levels compared with other centres, such as the historic site. Briefings to these staff emphasised the importance of the symbolism of our presence there. As one worker said after returning from a shift:

'I had no idea how difficult being a symbolic gesture could be'.

The nature of the response to the shootings also generated a debate within the community and amongst professionals about the use of terminology and the different meanings given to terms such as 'counselling'. The initial media releases and the sign posting for the recovery centre all used the term 'counselling' as if it were readily understood by the community. The media informed people that counselling was available and that families, friends and work colleagues were being referred for counselling in large numbers. To many the term 'counselling' was equated with vague notions of being treated for something in much the same way you would receive treatment for a broken bone. This view was also held by some workers.

Following consultation with community groups and community task force representatives, the literature advertising the

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> White M.1997, 'Establishing community recovery' in *Proceedings from the Port Arthur Seminar*, Melbourne, March 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Pam Ireland describing her impression of the first Community Recovery Task Force meeting at the Nubeena Council Chambers on the evening of Tuesday, 30 April 1996.

recovery centre's services was altered to emphasise the information, advice and support role rather than counselling.

The lesson to be learnt here is that practitioners need to vigorously debate the use of terminology, reach a position about what interventions are best suited to various stages of the recovery process and find ways of informing the public about what they might reasonably expect and benefit from in the recovery from

traumatic events. Social workers are in a unique position to inform and direct this debate.

In conclusion, I want to again emphasise the importance of the provision of information, advice and support to traumatised communities rather than focussing only on the provision of counselling. In his address to the Welfare Administrators Conference in Hobart in August 1996, Greg Burgess, the General Manager of the Tasman Council

stated:

'It was our responsibility to manage our own recovery. The department understood that. It did not come in and take over, but offered support, advice and encouragement.

When we faltered or were unsure of which way to turn, they were there with a steadying hand to guide us. At no time did we feel as if we had lost control or been taken over.'

## Letter to the Editor

### Cerebrally risking it (cont.)

or inactions) in a number of ways. Fundamental to the thought processes of those people, agencies, politicians and governments perceived responsible, are a set of understood, unwritten *laws*. Hazard mitigation (risk) planners and managers therefore need to be forever conscious of these *laws*. For the benefit of all, a non-exhaustive list is provided here.

- *The law of parsimony*. Bureaucrats often treat public moneys as their own. But the lowest tender is not necessarily the best one. Cheap solutions may only defer or exacerbate the problem.
- *The law of the plebian imperative*. One stakeholder group frequently gets its selfish wants mixed up with its needs, at the expense of other stakeholders.
- *The law of improbability*. Australians are great gamblers and it seems inconceivable that they can understand expressions of chance except when it is applied to potentials of risk.
- *The law of political expediency*. Gaining and maintaining power to the detriment of those who accidentally get in the way. Their kind of 'risk' is different (and more important they would say) than your kind of 'risk'.
- *The law of nature*. The 'greenies' would have us believe that natural environments should not be modified because people are not really part of the environment!
- *The law of ignorance is bliss*. In the military, 'ignorance' is regarded to be no excuse. It is more likely a cognitive choice not to listen, look or assimilate advice. This way, someone else should have done 'something'. But this assumes the citizen has any intelligence in the first place.
- *The law of political incredibility*. It is always 'previous government' that is blamed when something goes wrong. This way promises can be made but need never to be fulfilled. And if no one signs

off, no one else will remember who might be held responsible.

- *The law of expediency*. We live in a 'now' society. Anything that takes a bit longer to fix will be overtaken by something new. Sometimes the new 'fix' will be nothing more than the 'old' recycled with 'new' badges.
- *The law of procrastination*. If one is for crastination there is the risk of making a decision in haste and having to repent at leisure. If we crastinate long enough the problem usually resolves itself anyway.
- *The law of commercial imperative*. This means 'You have the money and I am going to get you to give it to me'. Put another way, 'Heads I win, tails you lose'. The provision of many public services cannot be economically justified by this doctrine. However, a certain standard of social equity is dictated by the will of the people in a true democratic society.
- *The law of privatisation*. That's what some governments do to your privates. Conscripted, and once they're gone they are often gone for good. The only way a society can recover is by nationalising industry (as has been done in Australia in the past) or by deferring the problem as a legacy for future generations.
- *The law of optimality*. Also known as 'just-in-time' or 'less than enough most of the time'. It relies on the parable of wanting a Cadillac in a bicycle society but having to ride a donkey instead. It is useful to see it as a conflict between the ability to pay and the human characteristic to want. In mathematical terms it is also known as 'the lowest common denominator'.
- *The law of ethicality*. This law can be regarded simply as an esoteric, archaic subject once taught by early Greek scholars and in the better private schools in Australia. Ethics may now be regarded

as obsolescent in our society.

- *Murphy's law*. 'Anything that can go wrong will go wrong.' This is simply a neurotic state of mind. Every bureaucrat knows that modern information technology and reductionism allows for all aberrations to be predetermined and pre-emptively neutralised by the Special Executive Service according to their ephemeral perception of the current political whim.
- *The law of scientific righteousness*. 'Scientists' often try to be intellectually superior and this is often without justification. They argue an inalienable right to do this or that in a 'black box' environment. They typically argue with the benefit of 20:20 hindsight and seldom ever do they have to make 'real-time' decisions affecting the lives and property of people. 'All care and no responsibility'—so long as it is done scientifically—is just not good enough.
- *Public policy*. Its misspelling was once a dirty joke. Many people still regard 'public policy' as a dirty joke. It was also once regarded as policy of the public for the public. Today it is more likely policy to have no policy (and that is a policy). More and more responsibility for deriving public policy is being privatised anyway!
- *Public service*. The public is often referred to as 'the mug punters', 'the great unwashed', 'the plebs' etc. Service is what you more commonly do not get in today's 'me' environment. The original intention was that these people were servants of the public, all that remains is that they continue to be funded by the taxpayers.

#### Des Lambley

(Signing my name to this is also a risk I suspect [assessed by an AS4360:1995 process], for there are many humourless people out there who would think that I am not at all pulling their leg in a typical Australian way. But my concern is, have I insulted everyone?)