# Initiatives for emergency services organisations: a national perspective

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The 1990s have seen significant changes in the environment, or more accurately the multiple environments, in which our emergency service organisations operate, and in the organisations themselves. As always, the future of such changes is uncertain, some are likely to continue into the 21st century, while others may turn out to be ephemera and become just footnotes to history.

Would that we could accurately forecast which is which! But I suggest that many of these changes have been so significant that their effects will linger on, whether the influences, which appear to drive them today, remain or not.

So I would like to offer an examination, from a largely national perspective, of some of what I believe to be the more important of those changes. Out of this I would hope to invite your consideration of the impact of such changes on current organisational developments in the field of emergency management, and what these impacts might mean in the context of the concerns of this conference. Finally, I would like to suggest some opportunities and some challenges for our organisations into the future.

Let me make just one disclaimer, my views will be essentially the product of my own experience in the field of emergency management and of my own understandings. My crystal ball, like yours, reflects that experience and those understandings, and inevitably distorts a picture, which is cloudy enough at the best of times. But nothing venture, nothing gained.

## Our multiple environments

The total environment within which we live and work is itself a compound of many separate elements which interact in complex ways.

We would all, I suggest, recognise that the 'three Ps'—politics, people and the physical world—represent the principal environments that shape the total environment within which all our organisations must work.

### The politics

Taking first the political environment, there can be no question that the most dramatic change in that environment has occurred as a product of the way in which governments, whatever their political orientation, have increasingly chosen to go about their business. Governments today are about 'steering not rowing', more about facilitating the way things are done within their communities than actually doing them. In the process, governments are increasingly divesting themselves of functions, which they no longer see as 'core business' and which they believe the private sector can perform.

There is, of course, often an ideological element in this process and in the apparent belief that, at government level, 'the private sector can do it better', but there is also a reality in the constant demand which governments face to provide more services at ever-increasing cost, while the sources of revenue open to them are finite and often under challenge. 'Doing more with less' becomes a necessity rather than just a hobbyhorse, and yesterday's relative certainties are today's insecurities.

### The people

While they might not always wish it, people are inevitably impacted by changes in the political environment, and those impacts fall both on the people who need our services and on the men and women themselves who provide those services.

The people in the communities we serve, our 'stakeholders' and 'clients', if you wish to refer to them in such 'value-free' terms! — have undoubtedly suffered from many of the recent changes in our political environment: statistics on wealth disparities, figures on homelessness, apparently insoluble health problems in parts of those communities are just some of the indicators of adverse political impacts. Dealing on a day-to-day basis with the members of our communities, as most of members of the emergency services must, you would be only too aware of the 'down-side' effects of many of these impacts.

Our own services have, of course, had to cope directly with both the products of community change and the imperatives of political direction. Public demands for better and faster services don't sit well with the outcomes of 'down-sizing' and resource limitations, and the resultant anxieties and strains that such conflicting pressures often place on both the service-deliverer at the 'sharp end' and the service-manager in his too-often-insecure office are too frequently evident. As a positive offset to such problems, and sometimes even in spite of them, it is heartening to recognise the continuing dedication and increasing professionalism shown at all levels of our services.

### The physical world

Even the physical and human environment in which we operate has produced some uncertainties in place of the relatively fixed order of things, which we accepted in the confident 1960s and 1970s.

In those days, for example, the *El niño (*Southern Oscillation) phenomenon was unknown. However, while today we know that in this country we have just experienced one of the worst summers in our recent experience by courtesy of an *El niño* event, with its severe drought and bushfire impacts, we don't yet know whether that event falls within the expected range of climate *variability* or whether it is a portent of more threatening climate *change*. 'Global warming' might conceivably be a product of that change, or might indeed be driving it—we don't yet know whether it is even a reality!

As another example, our confidence that we were well on the way to eradicating many of the world's communicable diseases, as we had done with smallpox, has taken a battering with a resurgence of many of such diseases and their appearance in new forms. Childhood diseases, which in our community we had thought to be things of the past, such as measles and pertussis, are claiming new headlines; worldwide, diseases like tuberculosis and cholera appear to be rampant.

In a related field, some of the barriers we had confidently assumed were in place to prevent the transfer of animal diseases to humans seem to have been breached, as the link between BSE in cattle and CJD in humans overseas and our own recent experience with equine morbillivirus and bat lyssavirus appear to demonstrate. At least some of this is being attributed to an expanding world population coming into increasing contact with physical environments in which new threats have been hidden or lain dormant until people have, by choice or lack of it, moved into contact with such environments. Our world itself seems suddenly to have become more threatening.

### The information–communication revolution as part of our environment

No review of our changing environment and the impact it is having on emergency service organisations and their methods of operation would be complete without some reference to the information–communication revolution. I believe you don't have to be a Luddite to agree that:

> 'The existence of better communication facilities does not necessarily lead in itself to a better exchange of knowledge and intelligence or a greater understanding of what is occurring' (Quarantelli, 1997).

Quarantelli's recent article, from which this quotation is taken, should be required reading for emergency service organisation managers. It suggests ten problems for disaster planning, management and research ranging from the new kind of disaster that can result from computer-related system failures through the difficulties which new technologies pose for intra- and inter-organisational communication and coordination to those resulting from information overload and the rapid diffusion of incomplete or potentially-inaccurate information.

## The consequences of environmental change

I have touched on just some of the significant changes which have impacted on the environment in which emergency service organisations have had to operate in the 1990s, and we cannot yet measure the full effects of those impacts—imponderables and uncertainties abound. From a national viewpoint, however, we can already discern the direction in which those impacts are moving our organisations, many and varied though those organisations may be.

Indeed, the very diversity of the organisations which identify themselves with fire and emergency service roles is itself worthy of note, and adds its own complexities to those brought about in a changing environment. Consider:

- some are statutory authorities deriving their roles and organisation from government legislation, while others represent private sector interests
- some have emergency response as their primary role, whether that response is to single incidents or larger-scale emergencies and disasters, while others have such a role as secondary to their principal functions and responsibilities or simply provide support to other agencies in their emergency response role
- some have a responsibility in only one area of the management of emergencies within the community, be it prevention–mitigation, preparedness and response, or recovery, while others have responsibilities in more than one, while
- some are staffed principally by full-time officers, others primarily by volunteers.

And so the list of differences goes on. The diversity of organisational functions and interests is well represented in any conference of emergency services organisations, which generally seek to offer something for all while recognising how difficult it is to find unifying themes—and thus failing to satisfy any.

In one sense, of course, it is a healthy diversity—it allows for differing view points, encourages a sharing of experience and promotes valuable inter-organisational networks. But in an environment which demands that each organisation focus on its own 'core business', espouses principles such as productivity savings and 'user pays', and enforces budget stringency and rationalisation of services, our organisations can tend to become inward-looking, constantly subject to both internal and external review, locked into a continuing process of 'down-sizing' or 'right-sizing', and inordinately anxious about the future.

Where resources are scarce or tightly rationed, the competition for such resources can become fierce and normally healthy and basically friendly interagency rivalries can turn bitter. Jurisdictional conflict can be promoted even at operational levels, feeding on 'the state and agency rivalries that exist in any attempt at systematic coordination and planning (in disaster management in Australia)' (Kouzmin *et al*, 1995).

There is, however, a potentially unifying theme that would provide a basis for promoting effective coordination while retaining the healthy aspects of diversity—the recognition that all our organisations are in fact working towards the same end, that of *the promotion and preservation of public safety.*

I would like to define public safety in the broadest possible terms, as a function which seeks to ensure that all citizens in our communities can live, work and pursue their particular interests and needs in a safe physical and social environment.

In working together towards such a goal, we will increasingly find ourselves identifying the 'core business' of our fire and emergency services as the *effective management of community risk*. A recognised common goal in public safety and a shared methodology in risk management offer both the opportunity for the development of a more cohesive and integrated approach to emergency and disaster management, and some degree of organisational protection from 'divide and conquer' policies.

## The theme of 'public safety'

> 'The public deserves a truly seamless service when it needs the assistance of public services.' (Doyle, 1996)

John Doyle was commenting on the recent experiences of the fire services in the UK when he wrote these words, and as an aside it is interesting to note that while there are many organisational differences between the UK and Australian fire services he identified many of the same environmental changes and pressures at work there as we can recognise in our own experience. His article discusses the benefits of active policies of 'benchmarking' and 'teaming' in coping with these changes and pressures.

However, a 'truly seamless service' can only be offered when all emergency service organisations recognise that their common goal of the promotion and preservation of public safety can only be reached by integrated and co-operative effort.

### Progress in the area of training

In at least one small way, this has already come to be recognised in the area of training. In July last year, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) sponsored the formation of the new Public Safety Industry Training Accreditation Board (PSITAB), with representation from a number of emergency service organisations including the Department of Defence. The creation of this new national body is recognition both of the existence of a national 'public safety industry' and of the need to rationalise much of the training that has formerly been planned and conducted on an agency-by-agency basis, with a good deal of overlap and duplication.

The PSITAB's first task has been to identify a range of common training requirements, which can be addressed more effectively through the development of competency-based 'training packages'. The

immediate benefits can be better training, more consistent training, increased employment flexibility and significant savings in overall 'training dollars', all in the interests of an improved level of public safety for the people of Australia.

Already, the PSITAB has identified a broad range of common and required competencies ranging from operative to management levels within the Australian Qualifications Framework. This has resulted in the development of a 'training package' of which the key elements, consisting of new public safety competency standards, assessment guidelines and relationships within the Australian Qualifications Framework have been endorsed by the National Training Framework Committee, and by March 1999 it is expected that the remaining elements of the 'package', the necessary learning, assessment and professional development materials, will also have been developed.

Yet even this initiative shows that we are a long way from acknowledging the full range of services and activities which need to be involved in order to achieve our goal of a 'truly seamless service' in furtherance of public safety. The membership of the PSITAB is heavily response-oriented; prevention–mitigation and recovery agencies have not been directly represented to date. Agencies performing functions critical to public safety in its broadest sense, such as those in human health, occupational and industrial health and safety, animal health and environmental protection areas, have been similarly unrepresented.

There can be no question that these and other agencies make a positive contribution to public safety. The threatening changes in our physical and human environment suggested earlier make it clear that their work needs to be more effectively integrated with the work of the more traditional emergency services.

While it might be claimed that the interests of these agencies are safeguarded through other industry training accreditation boards and there appear to be moves to admit some of them as 'corresponding' members of the national PSITAB (a model adopted in some of the equivalent State bodies), it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that we have not been very imaginative in our approach to public safety, even in an area as limited as training.

### 'Adding value' to single-service efforts in public safety

We should be thinking beyond such developments, in terms of 'adding value' to our present agency-by-agency efforts through the evolution of national, State and Territory public safety policies and practices.

Formulated and publicised public safety policies can provide an envelope within which all our activities, whether directed towards prevention and mitigation, preparedness and response, or recovery, can be seen as working coherently towards the same goal, and should clearly be recognised by both governments and the public as a proper 'community service obligation'—and indeed as a significant part of the 'core business' of government itself. Integrated public safety practices will allow the fire and emergency service organisations, to demonstrate that for our part we will provide appropriate, effective, efficient, and cost-benefit-related services in pursuit of public safety policy goals.

All States and Territories in Australia now have an emergency management 'peak body' to ensure effective integration of emergency management activities (an inter-departmental emergency management committee or its equivalent). At the national level, their equivalent 'peak body' is the National Emergency Management Committee.

While they have gone a long way towards ensuring more effective agency coordination, particularly in preparedness, response and early recovery activities, they have not yet achieved any sort of 'truly seamless public safety service' to deal comprehensively and in an integrated fashion with risk in our community.

### A 'public safety charter'?

The first step in developing such a service would be the establishment of a 'public safety charter', with the respective levels of government and the emergency services themselves making a commitment to the provision of a range of integrated services to ensure the maintenance of the level of public safety, which our community has a right to expect.

Such a 'charter' would, as a minimum:

- declare public safety to be a human right and a 'community service obligation' on the part of governments at all levels (and as a recognised responsibility of local government in particular)
- specify public and private sector and citizen roles and responsibilities in public safety
- define public safety goals
- identify public safety agencies and require them to address public safety goals within their corporate plans.

## Risk management as our core business

If the theme of public safety and a 'public safety charter' can provide a much-needed force for integration of the efforts of our emergency service organisations and promotion of their community service role, a recent joint Australian–New Zealand initiative offers an ideal vehicle for establishing a common focus for those efforts.

### The Australia/New Zealand Risk Management Standard

In November 1995, the Councils of Standards Australia and Standards New Zealand approved a new joint standard on risk management. Many would already be acquainted with this standard, but I want to suggest why the principles underlying the new standard and processes derived from them should become core business for all involved in public safety.

Engineers have long been accustomed professionally to dealing with the subject of risk in structures and manufacturing processes, and risk management is increasingly recognised as an integral part of good management practice generally. The new standard, however, extends earlier understandings of risk by placing it clearly in a *social* context, by recognising that all human activity occurs in a risk environment and that risk management processes need to be 'applied in any situation where an undesired or unexpected outcome' (AS/NZS 4360, p. 2) in such activity could be significant.

In one sense, the risk management process described in AS/NZS 4360 is hardly revolutionary, but it is this understanding of the social context of risk, the recognition that all forms of risk require the systematic application of policies, procedures and practices to eliminate, reduce and manage that risk, that makes the standard central to our activities in the public safety arena.

### The social context of risks to 'public safety'

This is best demonstrated by referring to just one 'step' in the standard's risk management process—described as 'analyse risks'. Any engineer would be quite happy with the major activities involved in this 'step'—'*determine likelihood*' and '*determine consequence*'. Combining these activities will lead to the establishment of a level of significance for the particular risk under consideration. However, let's look more closely at what is actually involved in those activities, in a public safety context.

Traditionally, these activities involved detailed examination of the sources of risk, the *hazards*. In the social context of risk, however, the elements at risk, the *vulnerabilities* of the community and of the particular individuals and social groups of which that community is composed, are at least co-equal with the *hazards* in any

analysis of the likelihood and consequence of risk. As we all know, it is not simply the piece of machinery, the industrial process, the earthquake or the flood—the *hazard* itself—which describes the risk involved, but the likelihood that the hazard will impact on people or communities and the consequences of that impact.

And clearly, planning to deal with risk in its social context needs to recognise that there are a number of options which must be pursued, including eliminating or modifying the hazard and its impact and reducing the vulnerability of people and communities.

It is this characteristic of the new risk management standard which I believe makes that standard so relevant to our joint activities in the public safety arena, and offers it as an appropriate vehicle for developing a common organisational focus. There is, of course, a rather practical and pressing reason why we should all give the standard our closest attention—as a national standard, it is a 'best practice' formulation which can increasingly be expected to be referred to in any examination or inquiry into how we have planned and operated in our organisational responsibilities for the management of risk.

## Applying the standard to public safety operations

While the standard itself is 'generic and independent of any specific industry or economic sector', it would be incumbent on any organisation, and in particular any organisation with responsibilities in public safety, to develop and implement guidelines for the application of that standard to its operations. I am pleased to note that a set of general guidelines for the application of the principles and processes of the standard within 'national emergency management industry' is currently being drafted under the sponsorship of Emergency Management Australia.

However, there is a need for some degree of urgency in completing the new guidelines and in effectively promulgating the new guidelines within the broader public safety 'industry'.

There is at present an observable tendency, perhaps more evident among those emergency management practitioners who have seen the adoption of the standard as an opportunity for the creation of a 'niche market', to attempt to apply the risk management standard's process without due recognition of the need to relate that process to the particular requirements of the community risk management context.

The first step in the standard's process, detailed in section 4.1 of the published standard, is that of 'establishing the context' in which the rest of the risk management process will take place. There are two elements in this step that need careful interpretation if the standard is to be appropriately applied in the public safety sector—establishing the 'strategic' and 'organisational' contexts.

The standard prescribes that establishing the 'strategic' context should focus on the 'environment in which the organisation operates'. As already discussed, the public safety environment has a social context and focuses on community issues. Thus, while the standard, given its strong industrial and commercial orientation and its inevitable linkages with an engineering approach to risk management, tends to regard treatment of risk as primarily a matter of reducing, transferring or avoiding the likelihood or consequence of *hazard*, it is silent on the issue of *vulnerability*, which as I suggested earlier is critical in the community risk management context.

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The 'organisational' context of public safety risk management also differs from that in which many other users of the risk management standard are likely to find themselves. The standard is clearly designed for single organisations working in an environment in which hazards are basically industry-specific. In the public safety context, multiple organisations must operate co-operatively in a community-oriented multiple-hazard environment. Each public safety organisation thus has to deal with two sets of risk management responsibilities—managing risk in the performance of its own organisational functions and tasks, and contributing to the management of risk within the community that it serves.

The two sets are not necessarily congruent, and priority given to one area may impact adversely on ability to discharge the organisation's risk management responsibilities effectively in the other. Clearly, public safety organisations need to distinguish between their single-organisation risk management requirements and their broader community risk management responsibilities. They need, therefore to provide appropriate guidelines not only for each area of responsibility but also for the resolution at both operational and management levels of conflict where this could potentially occur in the attempt to satisfy both needs. There are some implications here for in-service organisational education and training that will need to be addressed by each organisation.

These cautionary notes aside, the new standard offers our organisations an opportunity to find common ground in our approach to the pro-active management of both organisational and community risk, and give less emphasis to what is often seen by others as an over-riding concern with reactive management to particular hazard events.

## Conclusion

At this stage in the development of fire and emergency service organisations in Australia, we face a wide range of opportunities and challenges—opportunities for better service to our clients, and challenges to demonstrate the effectiveness of that service to our stakeholders.

We can best meet both through a joint commitment to the theme of public safety and through the adoption of community risk management as our core business. We urgently need a common focus for our many and varied activities, as there is no reason to suppose that the rate of change in the environment in which we operate will slow, or that pressures for us to 'do more with less' will slacken. We therefore need to recognise, promote and build upon our joint contribution to the safety of Australians everywhere.

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