

# AJEM FOREWORD

By Tony Pearce, Director General, Emergency Management Australia.

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## *Communication as core business*



There was a certain irony in an opinion article header in a recent capital city newspaper entitled 'Pause for a communications breakdown'. The commentator might well have been reflecting on political or national issues of the day, but regardless of the importance of the content, the heading is of the kind that prompts those of

us in the emergency management sector to take a second look. The combination of the two words 'communications' and 'breakdown' have all too often been the cause of intense concern at times of emergency or disaster.

When an emergency is upon us – whether it be slow or rapid onset – it is the reliability and effectiveness of communication that will provide the linchpin to the safety of a community and its people.

But the word 'communication' has become somewhat generic of recent times, leaving many of us confused as to how the topic relates to our particular view of emergency management. Is it the technology of communications? – such as radios, satellite telephones, internet or other electronic devices. Or is communication the interaction amongst those who are engaged in the work of emergency services? – perhaps the instructions or the reports that have become such an essential tool of our trade? Or is communication simply the emergency alert or warning, or the public awareness campaign to get everyone better prepared for an impending disaster?

Then again perhaps it is the role of the communicators? – those who are required to move the emergency messages out to the public, or through to the media, or across to our colleagues in business and industry, or up the ladder to our political leaders.

I had the pleasure back in June to participate at a conference of just such communicators. It was the second annual conference of media and public affairs professionals in the emergency sector in Australia. Delegates comprised a very enthusiastic collection of media liaison officers from all tiers of government and some NGOs, along with public relations practitioners and a few representatives from media networks. They came from every state and territory and many came from departments and agencies other than the regular combat organisations. The conference, supported and sponsored primarily by EMA and the Queensland Department of Emergency

Services, also drew on strong involvement by the media studies and communication faculties of several universities. While providing a solid grounding of academic support, the involvement of communication lecturers is a logical connection to a future source of qualified people to service the needs of the emergency sector.

The conference took as its theme the challenging goal: "Excellence in Crisis Communications". Along with international input from Canada on effective communication planning, and an assessment of crisis communication at major terrorism incidents in the United Kingdom and Europe, the conference traversed an excellent selection of topics. They ranged from the Language of Emergency and Challenges facing Crisis Communicators, to Crisis Preparedness for Industry, and case studies on the recent equine influenza outbreak and on a multi-jurisdictional crisis simulation of a major highway incident.

While a panel of senior media specialists from radio, television and newspapers provided robust realism, it was a welcome opportunity for delegates to hear at first hand just how important it is for a partnership with the media to be developed.

As emphasised by Victoria's Emergency Services Commissioner, Bruce Esplin, in his keynote address to the conference, communication is core business—not an add-on. He went on to add that communication is likely to be one of the primary subjects upon which the public will judge the effectiveness of our organisations in a time of emergency.

I would concur and expand the Commissioner's advice to say that as we watch increasing numbers of natural and human-caused disasters unfolding across the globe, the value of quality and timely messages to the communities of people under threat, will become paramount and directly relative to the degree to which the emergency impacts upon us. I commend the initiative of those in the media liaison and public affairs sections of emergency management, for bringing together your colleagues and peers to focus on your roles and how to be more effective. Your challenge now is to continue the interaction and the learning.

This issue of AJEM carries three of the papers presented to the communicators' conference.

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