

People in Disasters Conference

By Penelope Burns, Western Sydney University

The People in Disasters Conference was held in Christchurch, New Zealand in February. The conference was about sharing people's journeys through disasters, including the role of healthcare workers and other professionals in providing the best care for individuals, families and communities.

'Without people there would be no disasters.'
(WHO/EHA¹)

The conference coincided with the five-year anniversary of the earthquakes in Christchurch, and was poignantly preceded by a destructive quake. The event was hosted by the Canterbury District Health Board and Researching the Health Implications of Seismic Events Group in Christchurch in a disaster-experienced community. A diverse range of local and international speakers spoke from the heart of their experiences and the lessons they learned.

It was a collaboration from the outset and, for visitors from overseas, the conference became a community, full of open sharing of the human experience of extreme situations.

Themes covered response, recovery and resilience and attendees heard from emergency services personnel, hospital staff, mental health teams, animal welfare groups, teachers, government leaders, engineers, community general practitioners and nurses, pharmacists, and the local clown doctors! These groups

crossed cultures with a strong ongoing theme of the Maori experience.

The emphasis was on the need for disaster risk reduction (DRR) as promoted through the *Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030*.

Conference participants raised some key issues:

- Any efforts in DRR need to align with global efforts.
- Research and personal stories are needed to provide insight into how we manage disasters.
- Educating our youth in innovative ways will improve preparedness and understanding for the future.
- The focus should be on 'locals helping locals' to support the strengths and capabilities of the community in recovery rather than outsiders doing it for them.
- Leadership, partnership and trusted relationships across disciplines and cultures are crucial developments in the planning stages to support response and recovery.
- Post-disaster management is needed as well as the response plan during the emergency.
- After disasters people move to a new future not back to the same past; and we need to recognise that the time frame of recovery can span decades and generations.

The conference highlighted the need to work together across nations and disciplines, through sharing of knowledge and experience, to reduce risk and vulnerability.

Many of the conference sessions were recorded and are online at the University of Canterbury: <https://quakestudies.canterbury.ac.nz/store/collection/925>.

1 World Health Organization/Emergency and Humanitarian Action Training Programme.



The conference highlighted the need to work together across nations and disciplines. Image: Sandra Richardson