Media Release

26 February 2009

LONG-TERM HEALTH RISK FOR BUSHFIRE SURVIVORS

The recent devastating bush fires in Victoria and the ongoing threat of fire this dry summer has the potential for long lasting impact on survivors, fire relief workers, volunteers as well as the broader community, Australia’s experts in the link between mental stress and cardiovascular health have warned.

Professor Murray Esler, an associate director at Baker IDI Heart and Diabetes Institute, said while there was no current data specific to bush fire, research related to other natural and unnatural disasters such as earthquakes and the September 11 terrorist attacks showed a spike in cardiac-related events, including heart attack and increased blood pressure, in the aftermath of episodes of high community stress. Further, previous research has established that risk factors such as blood pressure can rise throughout entire communities following traumatic events.

Professor Esler said that survivors of the fires should be aware that there were long-term risks associated with their involvement in such traumatic events and should also look out for shorter-term symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder which left untreated can have serious ramifications for health.

“During the ongoing stress and turmoil of recovery and rebuilding – of lives, houses and whole townships – we urge those affected to pay particular attention to any existing medical conditions they may have,” Professor Esler said.
“Any people currently on medication should have this reviewed by their GP as a precaution as they go about re-establishing their lives, and even those with no previous risk factors should be encouraged to have a general check up to assess their blood pressure and cholesterol levels.”

Professor Esler’s research into the link between stress, depressive illness, panic disorder and heart health has discovered a strong association between these conditions and long-term cardiovascular risk.

Traumatic events can take their toll not just in the hours and days, but in the weeks, months and years after the event itself has passed.

“The bushfire tragedy in Victoria has immediate repercussions for thousands of families who have lost loved ones, animals, businesses and their community,” Professor Esler said.

“Going by established research on the effects of such events we urge those affected, including those many people who volunteered their time to help the fire-ravaged communities, to take extra precautions to protect their longer-term health and in so doing re-assess their own risk factors for cardiovascular disease.”

Baker IDI director Professor Garry Jennings reinforced the message that everyone remember the importance of their general health in the aftermath of such tragedies.

“We would like people to remember that their individual health is most important as they go about the process of rebuilding and recovery,” Professor Jennings said.

“A simple trip to your GP to measure your blood pressure and discuss your personal situation and health at this tragic and stressful time is a worthwhile precaution.

“We encourage all of those people affected by the events of this summer to re-evaluate their health status with appropriate medical support.”
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