Will be catching up this evening on today's symposium on bushfires and climate change at #RANZCP2021, stand by for tweets below

President John Allan says this symposium originally planned in the wake of Australia's 2019-2020 #bushfirecrisis but still a very relevant topic. Will resonate with citizens long after #COVID19 has passed

Speakers for the session #RANZCP2021

Murray Wright, NSW chief psychiatrist up first on NSW response to the #bushfirecrisis. Wright says bushfires are "the" paradigm for understanding mental health disaster and response in an Australian context #RANZCP2021

Important to consider these issues given the 'inevitability' with #climatechange that bushfire events will become more frequent and worse, Wright says #RANZCP2021

Wright says existing disaster plans are always found wanting in retrospect - sometimes aspects, sometimes implementation - and that was certainly true in 19/20 #bushfirecrisis #RANZCP2021

Historically Wright says a disaster response has involved an event with a 'short, sharp, significant impact' with MH responses in the late acute & very early recovery
Wright reminds audience #bushfirecrisis began in NSW in September 2019 and raged until March 2020 ‘by which time we were preoccupied with a very different kind of disaster’ #RANZCP2021

There were 3 declarations of statewide disaster during that time, says Wright - Nov/Dec/Jan, each lasting 7 days. No small thing to do, had huge significance #RANZCP2021

Wright referring to Emotional Lifecycle of a Disaster (lots of airtime in various presentations this week) but says in NSW an important caveat - when #bushfirecrisis hit was on back of worst drought in living memory. ‘We were not pre-disaster, we were in a disaster’ #RANZCP2021

Says many of the communities most affected by #bushfirecrisis were also hardest hit by the drought. Says picture of ‘staccato decline in function’ due to rolling disasters. Also highlights hero > disillusionment very real for MH responders in these contexts #RANZCP2021

Wright said the government contacted all the state’s LHDs to put them on a disaster footing the week before Christmas 2019, January 3 advised teams to assemble for deployment, first crew arrived on South Coast Jan 6 #RANZCP2021
Sheer scale of the task was confronting. What do you do when almost half the districts in the state been bushfire affected? Where do the contingency staff come from? How long do you deploy for, when hero status swiftly turns to anger? 
#RANZCP2021

You can’t just deploy people, you have to ensure they are adequately trained (Wright says levels of this were ‘disturbingly low’ among those deployed in 19/20) and supported #RANZCP2021

Wright says communities moved from acute to recovery phase in random fashion and this was staggered across the state, presenting other challenges. Key to recovery was social cohesion, and letting it happen at own speed, not imposed agenda from above #RANZCP2021

Learning from #bushfirecrisis Wright says everyone needs MH first aid training 'because the levels of community distress we experienced were everywhere and everyone - the whole of the South Coast was traumatised' #RANZCP2021

Considering a RFS-like corps drawing on private psychiatrists & recent retirees to enlarge response capability. Also advocating for permanent 'recovery' clinicians rural & regionally #RANZCP2021
Next up is David Forbes from Phoenix Australia talking about longitudinal findings on bushfires and mental health 10 years on from Black Saturday #RANZCP2021

Forbes will be talking about the Beyond Bushfires study. You can read more about it here #RANZCP2021 https://mspgh.unimelb.edu.au/centres-institutes/centre-for-health-equity/research-group/beyond-bushfires

Forbes says 75% of Australians have experienced a potentially traumatic event, and 10-15% have survived a disaster. This will only worsen with 'climate change increasingly upon us' #RANZCP2021

People vary dramatically in how they respond to traumatic events says Forbes. Disruptions to function can be delayed for some, triggered by secondary but related events #RANZCP2021

Some factors increase risk for adverse mental health responses, including consecutive and compounding traumas #RANZCP2021
The Beyond Bushfires study found a link between intensity of impact and MH 'caseness' 3-4 years later (PTSD, affective, substance use) but life stressors contributed over and above direct impacts. Intense anger also had a link

#RANZCP2021

'Extremely worrying' to see stepwise increase related to fire intensity in women experiencing violence in the 12 months post the fires #RANZCP2021
What happens in the rest of the decade? PTSD decreases, depression & substance use hold steady. 22% of people in worst affected areas had PTSD, depression or severe distress in that period. Worsening MH linked to stressors, trauma, extent of property loss #RANZCP2021

'We're talking about #ClimateChange, we're talking about trauma on trauma on trauma, what we see in this dataset is over the course of ten years these factors accrue' says Forbes on cumulative MH impacts of successive disaster events #RANZCP2021

Forbes says important to note that the cohorts aren’t static, some people have PTSD at one time point, then recover, others emerge with new subsequent stressors #RANZCP2021

He also notes link in literature between levels of trauma and post-traumatic growth as well as stress. Important not to assume trauma=stress and give space for growth #RANZCP2021
Forbes says social ties and community cohesion are absolutely vital to recovery, esp for people living alone #RANZCP2021

#COVID19 has been a confounder to recovery in the regard - undermining of social behaviours by fear, uncertainty, perceptions of risk, quarantine. Really fed into post-traumatic, post-disaster phenomena #RANZCP2021

Implications of the study. Relationships, community cohesion, screening around MH & anger, links to community and family violence. long-term financial support. Building up local clinical capacity, not just FIFO surge #RANZCP2021

Brett McDermott will talk about impacts of disasters on children & adolescents. Says his experiences began as CAMHS reg responding to 1994 Sutherland bushfire in Sydney. 4 firefighters killed, 100 homes & primary school lost #RANZCP2021
Since then he has made a career of it #RANZCP2021

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McDermott says single event traumas other than earthquakes (much more mortality) are all incredibly similar. For kids PTSD mediated through other things - social connectedness (4x less likely), parental responses (hypervigilance, overprotective) #RANZCP2021

McDermott talking about the aftermath of the Grantham floods - had never seen anything like it in Australia. Whole houses just floated away, children inside. High levels of threat perception #RANZCP2021
McDermott says there is 'palpable' adolescent and older child angst over #ClimateChange, 'reef grief'. In future he expects to see acute single event trauma on top of heightened existential angst, increasing vulnerability to adverse impacts #RANZCP2021

Last speaker Charles LeFeuvre says #bushfirecrisis 19/20 was 'double trauma'. Fires themselves of course, but the smoke haze 'a global memorial to humans, other living beings & places we loved but had lost: it was a global fire alarm for a #ClimateEmergency' #RANZCP2021

'We could see it, we could smell it. It was personal. It was now. It was the future.' LeFeuvre talking about the concept of eco-distress. Many accept the reality of #ClimateChange but not its implications, 'so-called implicatory denial' #RANZCP2021

Implicatory denial has many mechanisms: pretending, dissociating, turning a blind eye, seeing and not seeing, he says. 'A bubble of apathy can occur'. Fear & grief can be overwhelming when this bubble bursts #RANZCP2021

'The #ClimateCrisis is a health crisis and a mental health crisis' says LeFeuvre. As it deepens, there are likely to be many stressors, increasing megafires & extreme weather events, mass migration & social collapse & conflict, w assoc psychiatric disorders #RANZCP2021

Ecological grief relates to loss or anticipated loss of species, ecosystems & meaningful landscapes. It is ongoing and will increase as #ClimateCrisis deepens, he says.
Watching slow and seemingly irrevocable impacts unfold and worrying about the future #RANZCP2021

'I think, if one does not feel fear about the situation, there must be some level of denial'. Points to eco distress as real and lived by Indigenous peoples, and widespread concern among children and young people #RANZCP2021

Young people are very prone to feel eco-anxiety and ecological grief, which can lead to mental illness says LeFeuvre. #ClimateAction, such as #schoolstrike4climate, can be beneficial #RANZCP2021

'Help for climate distress should come from our leaders' says LeFeuvre. Strong, realistic yet compassionate leadership allows space for uncomfortable feelings and provides moral direction in the face of uncertainty & insecurity #RANZCP2021

LeFeuvre says support from others is vital in managing eco-distress. Partners, communities. Talking about workshops where participants voice their fears about the climate, and share their feelings through art. These are some of the pieces #RANZCP2021

'We've witnessed those who have grieved over loss of land to drought, who grieved over so many beings in the bushfires... those who fear rising sea levels and diminishing ice, and those who fear human extinction’ #RANZCP2021

A shared sense of purpose can lead to hope, which LeFeuvre says is very different from optimism. 'Hope emerges through the process of engagement and action' #RANZCP2021

LeFeuvre says he is hoping to establish, by the end of this year, a climate-aware practitioner network across Australia to respond to the growing psychological impacts of the #ClimateEmergency 'for us and our patients’ #RANZCP2021

Discussion now. Wright saying we see every year leading into disaster season campaigns around physical preparedness - how can we emphasise psychological preparedness alongside this? #RANZCP2021
Messaging to help communities grapple with the anticipatory anxiety would help, Forbes says. Some of the strongest messages we have can sound very simple - sleep, exercise, eating, socially connecting, structuring day. Stress coping mechanisms. Enormous bang for buck #RANZCP2021

McDermott says emphasising coping strategies that work in non-disaster settings matters. And ‘active coping’ - kids and parents engaging in physical preparedness can be useful #RANZCP2021

Why aren't the community demanding more of our political leaders? LeFeuvre points to apathy, powerlessness. McDermott says it’s the 'perfect storm' of leadership & reporting - strong grassroots angst downplayed by media under influence of political masters #RANZCP2021

LeFeuvre agrees angst is real but the problem is people don't know what to do with it. On @RANZCP front Allan says have endorsed #ClimateEmergency, joined @DocsEnvAus, started process of divesting from fossil fuels, examining carbon footprint #RANZCP2021

(Shoutout to the amazing Helen Berry from McDermott, a wealth of knowledge and competence on #ClimateChange & #MentalHealth. Quite surprised not to see her on the program, featured so prominently at #ACEM19)

Great session! Will be storifying soon at @CroakeyNews, thanks for following along #RANZCP2021