Ex-tropical cyclone Jasper and floods: Media response for Croakey Health Media

Deadline to journalist: Wednesday 20 December 2023
Media name: Croakey Health Media (www.croakey.org)
Journalist: Alison Barrett, managing editor

Please attribute the following statements to Northern Queensland Primary Health Network (NQPHN) Chief Executive Officer Sean Rooney.

Responses to questions

Q1: What are the current health impacts from the floods?

Our thoughts are with those who have been impacted by ex-Tropical Cyclone Jasper and the floods, and we thank those who have worked tirelessly to keep our communities safe, including general practitioners (GPs) and other healthcare workers, pharmacies, hospital staff, and emergency response workers.

NQPHN has been in regular contact with primary care providers in the North Queensland regions affected by the cyclone and floods.

We know GPs, pharmacies, and other health professionals in the areas affected are doing all they can to remain open. Some have flood damage and power outages, and many have reported workforce shortages with their staff also affected by the floods and unable to get to work.

Access to primary care for routine care and minor injuries sustained through emergency and recovery activities, and access to medication remain the key health issues as a result of the cyclone and floods.

Emerging health risks from mosquitos, melioidosis, and contaminated water are also current concerns. Queensland Health has released fact sheets with further information, which are available on our website here under the heading ‘Public health advice’.

- How NQPHN is assisting

NQPHN has been providing daily updates on our website with a list of GP and pharmacy services that are open, including those in the Cairns, Cassowary Coast, Douglas, Mareeba, Yarrabah, and Tablelands Local Government Areas.

As the situation deescalates, we ask general practices and pharmacies in the region to let us know if their open status changes so we can update the website. We also have a list of health resources, including available mental health services, for people to access.
Communities in the Cairns and Cape York regions that have been affected by the floods also have access to the Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) GP Afterhours Telehealth service. This service is normally only available to people outside of the major population centres but has been extended short-term to take in flood-affected areas of the Cairns and Hinterland Hospital Health Service where patients with urgent medical needs are unable to access in-hours support.

In Cairns, NQPHN announced the opening of the Cairns South Medicare Urgent Care Clinic (UCC), which opened yesterday (Tuesday 19 December). It is now operating seven days a week, including weekends and public holidays. People don’t need an appointment and will be triaged on arrival.

More information about the Cairns South Medicare UCC can be seen here.

**Q2: How are supply chain disruptions impacting delivery of healthcare?**

We have heard from some pharmacies that they have had supply chain disruptions with roads being cut or flooded, which has impacted their access to supplies. Flood damage to vaccine fridges may also impact safe storage of supplies, and these cases are being dealt with appropriately.

It was heartening to hear that some pharmacies used recent NQPHN grants to purchase equipment that has helped them in the aftermath of the cyclone and flooding. Other GPs and health providers used grant funding to purchase telehealth equipment, which will be helpful for patients who don’t have access to their regular GP face to face at the current time.

**Q3: What is needed right now to help health services provide support and care to community members?**

Facilitating support and care to the community, as well at GPs, pharmacies, and other health professionals, requires a multifaceted approach, with all organisations working together for local recovery.

NQPHN is working closely with the Local Disaster Management Group (LDMG) and the District Disaster Management Group (DDMG).

NQPHN will continue to stay in contact with local GPs, health professionals, and pharmacies in northern Queensland during recovery to share relevant information and available health services – including the Cairns South Medicare UCC, mental health, and after-hours services – across our social media platforms and website.

We will also work with the Commonwealth Government to share support available for those in need.

**Q4: What is needed for continued support during the aftermath and longer-term recovery?**

We know general practices, other primary health providers, and pharmacies that are open and operating are doing everything they can help people affected by the floods across northern Queensland. However, practices and pharmacies affected by flooding will need support to help them get up and running again.

Mental health service access will also be critical for longer-term recovery, with timely access to peer support programs and counselling services for people of all ages, including children and young people.

NQPHN has available mental health services listed on our website, and we also offer an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to general practice and pharmacy staff affected by the impact of ex-
Topical Cyclone Jasper and associated flooding. To access the confidential service, they can call AccessEAP on 1800 818 728 and state that they are accessing the service for Northern Queensland PHN.

More information on financial assistance can be found here and here.

NQPHN has convened a Recovery and Resilience working group, which brings together leaders from the Hospital and Health Services, general practice, pharmacy, mental health, and aged care representative groups, to consider how the State and Federal Health Department staffs will work together to best support affected primary care service providers to get back on their feet, meet demand from impacted communities, and review lessons learned to build resilience for future events.

NQPHN will also participate in debriefing opportunities to learn from these events to help with future disaster preparedness planning to build resilience.

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