Dr Aileen Traves, RACGP Queensland Deputy Chair, and GP in Cairns

* What are the current health impacts from the floods?
Currently we are seeing a lot of distressed people who are struggling with loss of shelter, property, clothing, pets, livestock, power, food, fuel, phones, internet and money, and having difficulties with transport as a result of the flooding and significant damage to our local road networks here in Far North Queensland. There are a number of people needing urgent resupply of medications, as well as injuries sustained while trying to clean up prior to or following Tropical Cyclone Jasper, or while trying to escape rising floodwaters. We also have significant numbers of COVID infections again, and we expect these numbers to rise as obviously people have not been able to stay home. Over the next week we also expect to see increasing numbers of skin infections, waterborne infections, tropical diseases including mud and mosquito borne diseases, and gastrointestinal infections due to unsafe and contaminated food and water supplies.

* How are supply chain disruptions impacting delivery of healthcare?
The major issues currently are for supply chains of power, water, food and fuel. We have communities who have been without consistent power supply for over a week now. While many of these communities prepared well, they have exhausted their supplies and due to access issues it has not been possible to get new supplies through to them. Generators are running out of fuel, and people are running out of food, clean water, nappies and formula. At this stage we have not seen major supply issues of medications or dressings. There have been significant vaccine losses due to ongoing power failures.

* What is needed right now to help health services provide support and care to residents?
Right now the major issues are access to power, phones and internet. We have local practices who are working out of makeshift community centres as their practice is still without power. We also have GPs, nurses and practice staff who have not been able to return to work due to damage to their own homes, damage to the roads and the lack of childcare as other businesses struggle with similar issues.

* What is needed for continued support during the aftermath and longer-term recovery?
Long term support will be needed as the effects of these events will be felt here for months to years after this was headline news. There are many people without insurance already worried about what the future holds. We know the long-term effects of trauma and the impacts on the mental health of our communities and those responding to the events will last well into the future. It is critical to recognise the important role local GPs do play in responding to these disasters and supporting our communities, and we should be making sure GPs are involved in disaster recovery both short and long term.
We pay our respects to the Traditional Custodians of the Country where we live, work and travel upon, and to the Elders, past, present and future.

Dr Maria Boulton, AMA Queensland President

1. We welcome the Federal Government’s financial support for people in cyclone and flood-damaged areas.
2. This disaster has left many of our Far North Queensland communities devastated and they need every bit of help we can give them.
3. Some medical practices have unfortunately had no choice but to temporarily close after losing power or being flooded.
4. While some doctors are still operating, they are doing so under very challenging and unique circumstances. Many have unreliable internet and telephone services, with generators for power, and minimal staff.
5. General practitioner and AMA Queensland Committee of General Practice member Dr Lee Jones had even temporarily relocated his practice to the Yorkey’s Knob Boat Club to provide non-urgent care to anyone in the community who needed it. Thankfully, power has now been restored to the clinic.
6. Our doctors work tirelessly to care for their patients, and this is just one example of the lengths to which our dedicated health professionals will go to serve their communities.
7. What practices need right now is power, telephone and internet services restored. They also need access to medical supplies, antibiotics, and vaccines, help with cleaning or rebuilding, and access to disaster grant funding from the Commonwealth Government.
8. AMA Queensland also urges all practices that have not been affected to help those who have. This includes providing telehealth appointments to patients until their practices are back up and running.
9. Doctors remain concerned for patients who may be unable to access health services.
10. It is essential that people can get medical care.
11. AMA Queensland has contacted the Health Minister and Chief Health Officer requesting urgent support to help practices get back on their feet.
12. As a GP who has worked in communities affected by cyclones and flooding, AMA Queensland President Dr Maria Boulton has pushed for health messaging for the community to reduce the risks of skin infections, gastroenteritis and mosquito-borne diseases.
13. We also remind anyone who has lost medicines in the disaster that they can get small amounts of emergency medicine supplies from pharmacies without a script.
14. The government must also ensure communities are provided with long-term supports for their safety, health and recovery.
15. This includes mental health support for children, particularly those who have never experienced floods or cyclones, and healthcare workers, who always step up no matter the circumstances.
16. AMA Queensland has and will continue to attend meetings with local Hospitals, Health Services, Queensland Primary Health Networks, and other stakeholders to advocate for our members and community.
17. We have reached out to our members in affected areas and urged them to contact us with whatever support they need. It is essential local authorities do the same for the community and reach out to vulnerable patients to check on their wellbeing and provide support.
18. Practices that are in urgent need of power or assistance and patients seeking essentials like food and water are advised to contact their local disaster management group who can be contacted through the local council.

Debra Malthouse, CEO Apunipima Cape York Health Council
As a community-controlled health organisation, our primary focus is on providing safe, culturally responsive care and support where we can to those communities affected by this weather event. A number of our staff, both in Cairns, Mossman region and Wujal Wujal have also been impacted by the effects of this weather event and their safety has been at the forefront of our actions over the past week or so.

We understand that the major impacts on the health of community members at the moment is their wellbeing as a lot of individuals and families have been displaced and are experiencing a level of trauma. We are also concerned that where people are displaced, overcrowding may become an issue and increase the risk of health conditions such as skin disorders and ARF. Our Senior Clinician has issued health alerts to our Clinics for conditions such as Melioidosis which can present in wet weather and we are pre-empting that mosquito-borne infections may become an issue over the coming weeks.

As the majority of our staff are FIFO, immediately before, during and after, the event, our capacity to provide ongoing services through our Clinics has been hindered by the inability of our clinicians to travel to Cape York. The lack of access to clinicians has the capacity to affect community members with chronic conditions and comorbidities. Fortunately, prior to the event we were able to identify high-risk patients and continue to provide a level of support remotely from Cairns. We have been fortunate enough to have been able to offer telehealth services which has meant that community members have still been able to access a doctor with the assistance of local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers or Health Practitioners in communities not impacted directly by the weather event. We have now also been able to commence telehealth support to our clinic at Mossman Gorge also with the support of local staff and expect to have this Clinic fully operational early in the new year.

While we have not yet seen much supply chain disruption, we recognise that in those areas affected, access to clean water, food, shelter and other essential items are a priority and the focus of recovery. We have offered our support to the relevant Local Disaster Management Group and will assist in any way possible to help the affected communities recover from this event.

Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service spokesperson:
The health and safety of staff and patients affected by flooding in Far North Queensland is our priority.

Far North Queensland is no stranger to natural disasters, which is why Cairns and Hinterland Hospital and Health Service (CHHHS) plans and prepares for emergencies, including storing extra supplies in advance of cyclones.

We have access to Queensland Health’s network of strategically located distribution centres, which are equipped to resource our hospitals and health facilities when needed.
As the floodwaters recede and recovery continues, we are progressively re-commencing services across all local hospitals and health facilities including outpatients and elective surgery. Hospital staff are contacting patients directly regarding their appointments, including offering telephone appointments in circumstances where flooding limits access to in-person appointments.

Thanks to our forward planning, our hospitals have remained open through the cyclone and flooding. This is a testament to the resilience and hard work of our staff.

People affected can experience varying levels of distress in the aftermath of natural disasters, which is why CHHHS offer a range of supports for our staff and community as part of recovery efforts.

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