



Your details

Dr

Title

First name

Michael

Last name

Pentin

Submission details

I am making this submission as

A business owner

Submission type

I am submitting on behalf of my organisation

Organisation making the submission (if applicable)

Curalo Medical Clinic

Your position in the organisation (if applicable)

Owner and principal practitioner

Consent to make submission public

I give my consent for this submission to be made public

Share your experience or tell your story

Your story

I am the owner of the of the only open Medical Practice at the time of the early January bush fires. We had many issues with the lack of support from the health service and lacked protective equipment. There was no support from the local health service at the time of the two most severe fire emergencies, in-fact they actually withdrew support and left the community to fend for itself. To this day we are still dealing with people who are very traumatised from the fires.

The ongoing effect to medical services to the Eden area is that due to the publicity Eden received recruitment of doctors to the area in the future is going to become even more difficult than it is, which currently is almost impossible. I can see a time in the very near future when GP services on the Far South Coast are likely to be very minimal due to the retirement of most of the practice principals who are aged from late 50s to late 60s. The bush fires have been a further deterrent to doctors moving out of the main cities.

Terms of Reference (optional)

The Inquiry welcomes submissions that address the particular matters identified in its [Terms of Reference](#).

1.1 Causes and contributing factors

I have many patients who are of have been forestry workers and senior mangers. The consensus of opinion is that there has been a lack of hazard reduction burns and that the border fire could have been contained better if between 1st -3rd January 2020 back burning had been carried out near the NSW southern border. Unfortunately this was quashed by someone in the Sydney office of the forestry.

1.2 Preparation and planning

Since the bush fires the unburned forests around Eden and Merimbula remain in a very high fuel load and there has been minimal hazard reduction burning around the local towns which will make the area vulnerable to extreme fires next fire season.

1.3 Response to bushfires

Eden's aged care facilities were evacuated prior to the New Years Eve fire. The residents of BUPA Eden were move by bus to other BUPA facilities in the Canberra area with no major issues. Roy Wootten Gardens to Merimbula and Imlay House were evacuated to Hillgrove House in Bega.

The local Health service basically abandoned care of the community of Eden, Merimbula, Pambula Tura Beach and surrounding villages by closing and evacuating facilities at Pambula Hospital closing the emergency department and shutting Eden and Pambula Community Health Services until re establishing services on about 16th January 2020. There was no help acquiring smoke masks which were basically unavailable in the community until about 8th January (when we received some from the health service) and there was a withdrawal of almost all of the home nursing services. This decision was totally inappropriate as Pambula Hospital and Community Health could have provided an excellent triage place and treatment centre for the displaced people in there area. I attach a copy of a letter I sent to the Minister of Health about my concerns. I also attach a copy of an email my practice manager sent to Dr McKinnon GP season officer for the local area health service.

Our practice remained open between the major fires but had to close early on two occasions when the fires were imminent. We also closed on Monday 6th January when access back to Eden was not possible due to road closures however most of the residents were evacuated out of the area. I was available by at all times by phone to anyone who phoned the clinic and fortunately there were no communication or power blackouts. Many of the local population remain very mentally traumatised by the bushfire however government help appears to have evaporated due to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

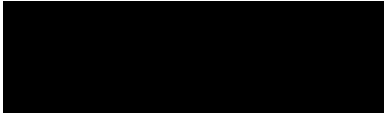
1.4 Any other matters

Enclosed are 2 letters the first as a letter of complaint to the health minister relating to the inadequate performance of the local health service, the second is a bit of a diary of what happen and what didn't from my practice manager.

Supporting documents or images

Attach files

- Eden Bush Fire Crisis.docx
 - Email to Dr D McKinnon 8 01 2020.pdf
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8th January 2020

Dear Mr Hazzard,

I have decided to contact you first before I contact other various organisations. I am the owner of the only currently open GP clinic in Eden. As you should be aware, dozens of homes have been burned down to the South of the town and flames are still licking around the town. We had a terrible bushfire nearby on New Years Eve causing dense smoke. On Saturday 4th January 2020 we had a much worse bush fire to the South, racing from Mallacoota, where my sister in law lost her home just prior, and at 4 pm the sky was pitch black and remained so until the 10am next morning which was terrifying for everyone around. The town of Eden was evacuated to Merimbula. I continued to be available over the phone via our clinics phone during this time. I attended to patients, including a palliative person who had evacuated to a holiday unit in Merimbula, who passed away in front of her son who had found his house was burnt to the ground, at that time. Several of my staff, and their pets, stayed in Eden on boats, with more than 50 people on board. On the Monday, I attended to displaced patients, who had urgent needs at supportive colleague's clinic in Merimbula using remote connection to our facility which, by some miracle, wasn't interrupted. I have spent most of the last few days seeing patients at my clinic in Eden who have lost their homes and are extremely traumatised. I have seen a man who walked 20km in the fire storm down the Princes Highway following the white line in the middle of the road out of the fire to Kiah. He has burns on his hands and blisters on his feet. The community in Eden is very traumatised. We have no offer of help from the local health service.

Today 8/1/2020 we finally received smoke masks at our clinic-rather late, I might add, from the health service.

What is the response of the local health service? They withdrew facilities. They closed Pambula Hospital at the time, they closed the Mental Health Facility at Pambula, They closed Community Health in Eden and Pambula without notice or consideration to people on the far south coast. Pambula hospital and the other facilities may at the time have been threatened and a response to temporary evacuate them may have been appropriate at that moment. Services could have been resumed the following day to help the numerous people who had been evacuated. There was no assistance from the health service, not even smoke masks. At this moment there is no time frame for the resumption of services at Pambula and Eden including much needed mental health. The community needs help, but is neglected by the health service in my opinion. We are very isolated. The staff of the Southern Area South of Pambula have been told to work in Bega, not locally, but displacing them from their homes at their own expense and putting them at risk of being isolated from their families if the fires flare up again. The Nursing Home, "Imlay House" which is next to the Pambula Hospital was evacuated prior to the fires and now the residents have returned. Despite this, the Health service has closed all facilities south of Bega until further notice. We have had minimal communication with the health service. Myself and my staff, my community, my family are very traumatised.

I request you immediately resume services on the far South Coast in Pambula and Eden, and start to actually support our community. If not if you do not respond with suitable actions I

shall look at other avenues to help our traumatised community very soon. I am very concerned for the people in the local community whom I have been caring for over the last 27 years.

There are other issues for the long term provision of health services in the rural areas which yourself and your federal counterpart need to be immediately addressed as soon as this crisis settles with which, I also wish to discuss with you. This communication has not yet been shared with anyone or organisation except yourself and Andrew Constance at the moment. I expect an immediate response.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Michael Pentin
Mob [REDACTED]

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Directors:
Dr Michael Pentin

Please find following a copy of an email sent on Wednesday 8th January 2020 to Dr Duncan McKinnon, GP in Bega NSW and GP Liaison officer of South East Regional Hospital.

Hi Duncan

As promised, this is a short diary of our week.

On Tuesday the 31st December 2019, Curalo Medical Clinic closed after lunch to allow everyone to go home because of road closures and bushfire activity. Prior to closure we were approached by [REDACTED], Community Health RN, who was at the Eden Evacuation Centre providing care for the Gippsland fires evacuees who had been sent to Eden. Dr Michael Pentin spoke to a General Practitioner who was amongst the Mallacoota evacuees who was willing to provide care if necessary. We provided [REDACTED] with oxygen, pulseoximeter, bandages, thermometers, stethoscopes etc to have on hand if they were required. I am unsure if [REDACTED] was acting in the role of Community Health Nurse or Red Cross volunteer.

Thursday the 2nd January 2020 [REDACTED] arrived to return the borrowed medical supplies which were thankfully not required. At this stage there was a planned evacuation of the entire township of Eden due to the extreme weather conditions due on Saturday and I enquired with [REDACTED] who I should contact to find out what role, if any, we would need to provide. She gave me contact for the local SES Captain [REDACTED], who then passed my details on to [REDACTED], the Eden Evacuation coordinator at the Eden Fishermans Club.

[REDACTED] contacted me on Thursday and advised me that she was unsure of any arrangements for medical care and after a short time called me back and advised me that she had spoken to someone at NSW Health and that they would send out some sort of advice to local providers.

We closed the Clinic at noon Friday to enable our staff to evacuate from Eden and I had at this stage received no further contact from the Evacuation Centre coordinator or NSW Health. No advice had been provided.

Saturday the 4th of January around 930am I received a call from [REDACTED] (evacuation coordinator) informing me that they were compiling a list of contacts for the Eden area to use to provide advice or help if they needed it. I told her that I would call our RN [REDACTED] and ask her if she was happy to be a contact. [REDACTED] was the only staff member who had remained in Eden and we had given her keys to the Clinic and she had taken medical supplies with her in the case of emergency. [REDACTED] contacted [REDACTED] shortly after and provided her with her contact details.

[REDACTED] was later herself evacuated to the Eden Fishermans Club and while she was there as an 'Evacuee' provided medical care to a small number of people. [REDACTED] contacted [REDACTED] as she was on the way to the Fishermans Club, presumably to ask for her advice. There was no other medical care provided although there was an Ambulance Chaplain and two police officers

attending as well as [REDACTED].. The people in the Eden evacuation centre were then that evening in turn evacuated to Bega.

Monday the 6th January Dr Michael Pentin attended to Curalo patients at Main Street Medical in Merimbula as well as doing a call to a palliative patient in a Motel in Merimbula. Sadly this patient passed away.

We have reopened on Tuesday 7th January and sadly many of our patients have lost their homes. No physical injuries have presented as yet. Apart from a call from [REDACTED] (PHN) who is currently on leave and kindly offered a call to enquire after our welfare first thing Tuesday morning, there had been no contact from NSW Health or their subsidiaries until this morning. I have had a phone call from Dr [REDACTED] from the NSW Health Emergency Operations Centre enquiring as to the current bushfire status of Eden. I have included her in this email so as she can be aware of our situation.

I will also note that there was a phone call last Thursday (?) informing us that the Pambula District Hospital was being evacuated. After this there was another call to inform us that the Emergency department was also closing. I did not take this call and am unaware of who provided this information. We must question the judgement here of NSW Health. If you are expecting a major incident in the southern area of the district, why remove the only support available for a very large radius?

Please let me know if you require any clarification or information.

Regards

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Curalo Medical Clinic