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## **Mental health support still needed for bushfire victims**

The fires may have been put out and residents have started to return home, but the lingering mental anguish caused by the Black Saturday fires is still a matter of concern for Victoria's general practice community, says Australian General Practice Network (AGPN) Chair Dr Emil Djakic.

Victorian divisions of general practice are meeting in Melbourne today to plan a coordinated approach to continued mental health support of individuals and families affected by the bushfires.

"It has been recognised from the first day that the rebuilding period for the people affected by the bushfires will be a lengthy one and divisions of general practice have been part of that recovery effort from the start," Dr Djakic said.

Divisions of general practice affected by the bushfires were part of the community effort that swung into action as the fires hit. Community Support Workers, engaged by divisions under the Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative, were on the ground immediately following the bushfires to offer support to individuals and families.

The support workers have continued to be active in the fire affected regions, where they are providing crisis counselling and mental health care for families in distress, with the mental health drought initiative sustained and expanded to provide ongoing care within communities, Dr Djakic said.

"Community support workers in their outreach capacity go out and talk to people, and put them in touch with much needed support services. They help to identify people who may need mental health support and offer crisis counselling where needed. Another important role is helping people who wouldn't normally know to, or know how to, access these services. They are making an important contribution to building resilience in these communities," Dr Djakic said.

In February \$7.5 million dollars was set aside by the Federal Government to contribute to health services for bushfire victims. While \$4.5 million was immediately funneled into existing mental health programs, \$3 million has yet to be allocated.

Divisions of general practice are keen to see this money put to use training more mental health workers, expanding community support worker numbers, further funding of programs that allow access to allied health professionals and infrastructure so families and communities can continue to rebuild.

The forum will also identify better ways of linking Federal and State health and social care initiatives to the bushfire region.

**For media interviews please phone AGPN Communications Manager  
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