

LETTER TO THE EDITOR:

## Supporting students in the aftermath of a weather-related disaster

J. Bailie

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**Keywords:** weather-related disaster; medical education; clinical placements; student support

People in northern New South Wales are contending with the consequences of the catastrophic flood that peaked on the 1st of March 2022. Among those impacted were the approximately 90 medical and allied health students who were in the region undertaking a rural placement through the University Centre for Rural Health (UCRH).

Students come to the region as part of the Australian government's commitment to build a rural health workforce. Some students undertake placements for a few weeks and others are here for a year, with placements in hospitals, community health and aged-care facilities, general practices and schools.

During the flood event, some students were staying in accommodation in locations that came under evacuation orders. Many of the flood-affected facilities are in areas that had never previously been identified as being at risk of flooding. Like the rest of the community, students experienced intense disruption of power, internet and mobile phone reception. In the fourth week after the flood, there is still limited local access to food, fuel and other basic supplies. Educational support systems were impacted, with entire loss of homes or substantial property damage affecting almost one in five members of UCRH staff.

As a UCRH supervisor of some students and a resident of the hard-hit town of Lismore, I am struggling to comprehend the scale of disaster and loss, like many others. I found myself opening our home to students, as we were among the fortunate households that did not lose key services. Students came to access power, internet and mobile reception and to be in a quiet place where they could reflect and debrief. During this period, we discussed issues such as expectations for continuing placements and balancing this with volunteering in recovery efforts, self-care strategies, disruptions to support networks,

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University Centre for Rural Health, The University of Sydney  
School of Public Health, The University of Sydney

**Correspondence**

Jodie Bailie

Email: [jodie.bailie@sydney.edu.au](mailto:jodie.bailie@sydney.edu.au)

the mental health impacts for the community and students' training to date in disaster preparation and clinical practice.

As a researcher, I turned to the literature and was struck by the paucity of peer-reviewed literature on how best to support students in the aftermath of a weather-related disaster. A systematic review published by Ashcroft and colleagues (2020) identified that students receive minimal teaching on disasters at medical school, and one could hypothesise that this may be the same for allied health. Acknowledging that current curricula may already be stretched, the increasing frequency of weather-related disasters warrants more attention to disaster-related training for students. Training should be informed by a good understanding of the experiences of health students in such weather-related disasters and consideration of preparedness and support requirements for future such events.

Students are not a homogenous group. The flooding and its aftermath will affect individuals and communities in a range of ways (Adams et al., 2021; Matthews et al., 2019). Most students are resilient, and many who participated in community recovery will have drawn strength from the experience (Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience, 2017). However, there is little doubt the disaster will continue to have adverse effects on some students' mental health over a long period of time (Fernandez et al., 2015; Matthews et al., 2019).

### Conflicts of interest and funding

The author declares no conflicts of interest or funding.

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