

Natural Disasters Expose Strain on Australia's Forensic Services

The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia (RCPA) is warning that the recent natural disasters and tragedies of the Victorian bushfires, the South Australian heatwave and the Queensland floods have demonstrated the precarious nature of forensic pathology services in Australia, and the nation's reliance on too few skilled professionals.

The President of the RCPA, Dr Beverly Rowbotham says the severe shortage of pathologists has been acutely felt during this time of national crisis.

"Australia has only 33 forensic pathologists," says Dr Rowbotham, "relative to over 20,000 deaths which are reported to the coroner each year.

"In the unfortunate event of disasters, natural or otherwise, our system is simply not able to cope with the enormous load this puts on such limited resources.

"Australian forensic pathologists have made enormous efforts to provide timely and accurate medical disaster victim identification service at this time, often going far above and beyond their normal call of duty in terms of working hours, forgoing leave and breaks.

"Even with a national approach, including assistance from forensic pathologists in other States, there are still only a handful of these doctors available to do this challenging and stressful work, which is inevitably a long, drawn out process.

"Throughout Australia, delays in routine medical death investigation due to poor staffing levels in forensic pathology adds an unacceptable burden on the many grieving families involved."

CEO of the RCPA, Dr Debra Graves, says since 2003, the RCPA has been warning the State and Federal governments of the severe shortage of pathologists, which affects not only forensic pathologists but spans all disciplines of pathology.

"The recent tragedies highlight just how fine a balance we currently have between demand and the ability of our profession to deliver," says Dr Graves.

"We're not too far from being unable to cope in such circumstances.

"Worryingly, this is not just contained on the forensic side. Should Australia encounter an epidemic, like SARS or the bird flu, the situation could be equally dire, as Australia simply doesn't have enough microbiologists to cope either.

"All aspects of pathology services are run on minimal resources.

“State and Federal governments must start to take the workforce shortage seriously, and to recognize the potentially deadly situation we could be facing without adequate numbers of skilled pathologists.”

13 March 2009

Media Enquiries

Dr Debra Graves
RCPA
(02) 8356 5858

or

Andrea Plawutsky
S2i Communications
(0419) 970 984