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Minister for Health and Ageing

MEDIA RELEASE

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More assistance to aid emotional recovery after bushfires

The Australian Government will provide further resources to aid the emotional and psychological recovery of bushfire affected families and communities in Victoria.

The Government has already provided a \$7.5 million mental health package to assist bushfire survivors.

Today, I am launching two new DVDs on post-traumatic stress disorder and acute stress disorder, funded by the Australian Government.

The DVDs were produced by the Australian Centre for Posttraumatic Mental Health (ACPMH) in collaboration with the Rural Health Education Foundation.

One is a resource for doctors and health practitioners, while the other is for individuals and families affected by trauma.

They were originally commissioned by my department to inform doctors and other health professionals and members of the community about how to apply the treatments recommended by the Australian Guidelines for the Treatment of Adults with Acute Stress Disorder and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

In the context of the fires, the Government and the ACPMH agreed to issue the DVDs as soon as possible and in greater numbers. There will now be 5,000 copies produced for practitioners and 7,000 copies for use in the community.

The DVDs will be distributed free of charge through the Rural Health Education Foundation, and through the ACPMH.

The first DVD, for health practitioners, assists them in applying the national guidelines when treating patients with posttraumatic stress disorder. The second DVD helps patients to understand what they are experiencing and follow the treatment advised for them.

We know that most people recover from a traumatic event without needing specialised treatment, however, there is a percentage who will need support for ongoing issues.

The Australian Government's \$7.5 million mental health package for bushfire survivors was announced by myself and the Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Jenny Macklin, in late February. It

focuses on providing primary mental health care services to people most affected by tragedy.

The bulk of the funds, \$4.5 million, has been directed to immediate counselling and support for victims. This includes almost \$2 million in extra funding in 2008-09 to the nine bushfire affected Divisions of General Practice in Victoria for additional services under the Access to Allied Psychological Services (ATAPS) program.

This additional funding will enable the Divisions to hire additional staff or purchase additional services for people with persisting mental health symptoms.

The Divisions will receive a further \$1.3 million for ATAPS services in 2009-2010 in recognition of the likely need for long term assistance to many people affected by the fires.

I have also revised the rules for the ATAPS program to make it more appropriate for this situation. ATAPS services will be extended to people with persisting psychological symptoms, not just those diagnosed with a mental health disorder, and the normal cap of 12 sessions in one year will be lifted for bushfire survivors.

The mental health package builds on the work of social workers, psychologists and case managers who provided counselling and support through Centrelink immediately after the fires.

Recovery from this terrible tragedy will be much slower, and less complete, unless we deal effectively with the psychological impact. The Australian Government continues to work closely with health professionals and with the Victorian Government to promote this healing process.

For all media inquiries, please contact the Minister's Office on 02 6277 7220.