



University Centre for  
**RURAL HEALTH**  
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# Royal Australasian College of Physicians Congress - Disasters and Mental Health:

## *Community Engagement in the Flood study*

Dr Jo Longman, University Centre for Rural Health (University of Sydney)

UCRH is a collaborating Centre between:



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SYDNEY**



**WESTERN SYDNEY**  
UNIVERSITY



**Southern Cross**  
University



UNIVERSITY  
OF WOLLONGONG  
AUSTRALIA



# Flooding in the Northern Rivers April 2017

- Video
- <https://vimeo.com/212871218/84642fa1e2>





*Academic lead for Mental  
Health: Professor James  
Bennett-Levy*

# University Centre for Rural Health



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# UCRH response

- What could we contribute as an academic organisation?
- Research into the health impacts to inform the flood recovery effort and to build resilience
- Local experience and the academic literature - most important and enduring health impact would be mental health
- Essential for research to be locally relevant and meaningful

# Floods and mental health

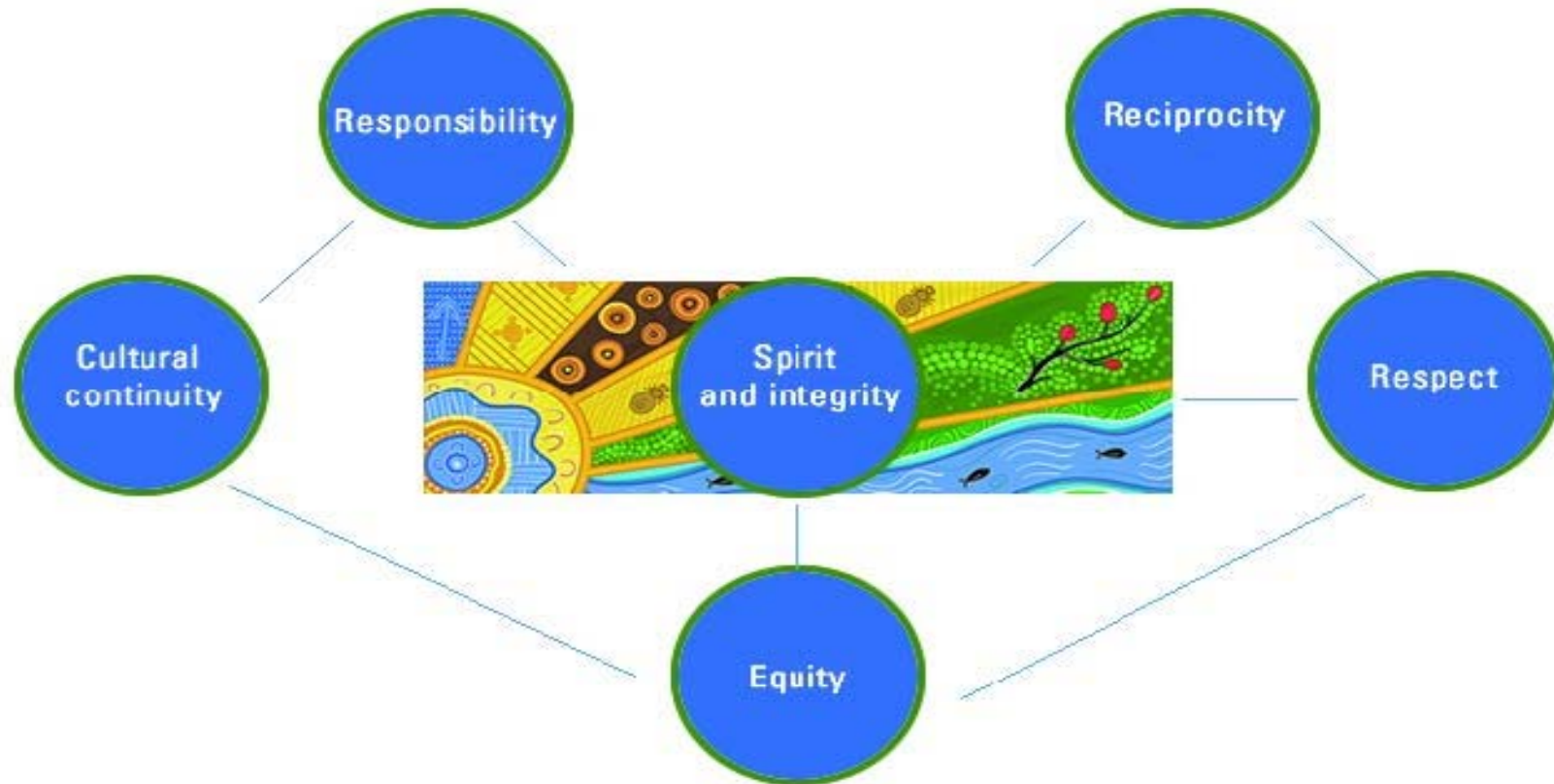
- Damage mental health both at the time of the flood and subsequently
  - Risk factors for mental health following flooding include degree of exposure, previous flood experience and disaster preparedness (Alderman, Turner et al. 2012)
  - Social support and connectedness seem to play a mitigating role (Stanke, Murray et al. 2012, Fernandez, Black et al. 2015)
- 
- Alderman, K., et al. (2012). "Floods and human health: A systematic review." *Environ Int* 47: 37-47
  - Clemens SL, Berry HL, McDermott BM, Harper CM. Summer of sorrow: measuring exposure to and impacts of trauma after Queensland's natural disasters of 2010–2011. *Med J Aust.* 2013;199(8):552-5
  - Fernandez A, Black J, Jones M, Wilson L, Salvador-Carulla L, Astell-Burt T, Black D. Flooding and mental health: a systematic mapping review. *PLoS one.* 2015 Apr 10;10(4):e0119929
  - Fewtrell, L. and D. Kay (2008). "An attempt to quantify the health impacts of flooding in the UK using an urban case study." *Public Health* 122(5): 446-451
  - Lowe D, Ebi KL, Forsberg B. Factors increasing vulnerability to health effects before, during and after floods. *International journal of environmental research and public health.* 2013;10(12):7015-67.
  - Munro, A., et al. (2017). "Effect of evacuation and displacement on the association between flooding and mental health outcomes: a cross-sectional analysis of UK survey data." *Lancet Planet Health*
  - Stanke C, Murray V, Amlôt R, Nurse J, Williams R. The effects of flooding on mental health: Outcomes and recommendations from a review of the literature. *PLoS currents.* 2012 May 30;4

# UCRH response

- What could we contribute as an academic organisation?
- Research into the health impacts **to inform the flood recovery effort and to build resilience**
- Local experience and the scientific literature - most important and enduring health impact would be mental health and wellbeing
- Essential for research to be **locally relevant and meaningful**



# Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and Communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders - NHMRC Public Consultation Draft 2017



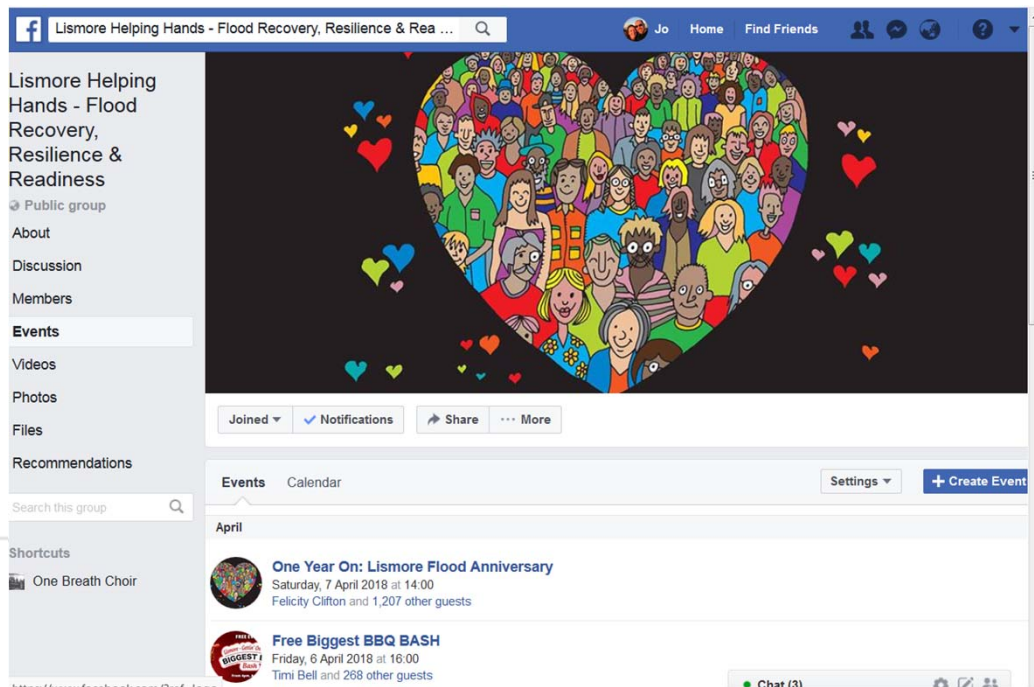
Maddie Braddon

Community engagement  
project officer, flood study



# The Northern Rivers and Community activism

- Strong history of community non-violent activism (1970s ending logging at Terania Creek, Bentley Blockade Coal Seam Gas mining protests)
- 2017 floods brought out community activist spirit - spontaneous volunteer action community group *Helping Hands*



# Community Engagement

- Used strong local networks to draw in
  - Community organisers
  - Activists
  - Residents
  - Emergency services
  - Government agencies
  - Non-government agencies
- Established Community Advisory Groups
- Recruited key people into the project team





...in partnership



The Winsome & Lismore Soup Kitchen



# Community Engagement

## Research focus and design:

- Discussing and agreeing focus
- Agreeing key interest groups
- Deciding questionnaire content
- Piloting questionnaire
- Designing recruitment approach

# Community Engagement

## Implementation:

- Raising awareness of the research
- Facilitating access to the questionnaire
- Support for questionnaire completion
- Input into focus for the initial analysis

## Dissemination:

- Effective mechanisms for dissemination
- Active research translation – investment in the results

# Community Engagement

- “It’s 7 months today since the flood, but I still get emotional filling this questionnaire.”
- “This has been an encouraging exercise – one I didn’t have in 1974, 1989 or 2011 Brisbane flood.”
- “Thank you for giving me the opportunity to think about and respond to these issues, it makes me feel it’s not forgotten – which is important- and that people care.”
- “After a major event many people are in shock for months and are unable to accept the help they need so don’t give up on them. Thanks.”



# Community Engagement



**Isaac Smith- mayor of Lismore**

*“This was a way to both help our community recover and discuss the unique circumstance around our flood event. It is my hope that this research allows other communities to become more resilient by better understanding our human response to disaster.”*



**Steve Carrigg – Rural adversity Mental Health Program, NSW LHD**

*“The Community Advisory Group was an example of true community consultation, ensuring that accurate and useful data was collected to guide the ongoing recovery of our community.”*

# Community Engagement



**Kerry Gibson- Red Cross Emergency Service Officer**

*“The Community Advisory Group set a new precedent for the way that we work together locally after an emergency event.”*

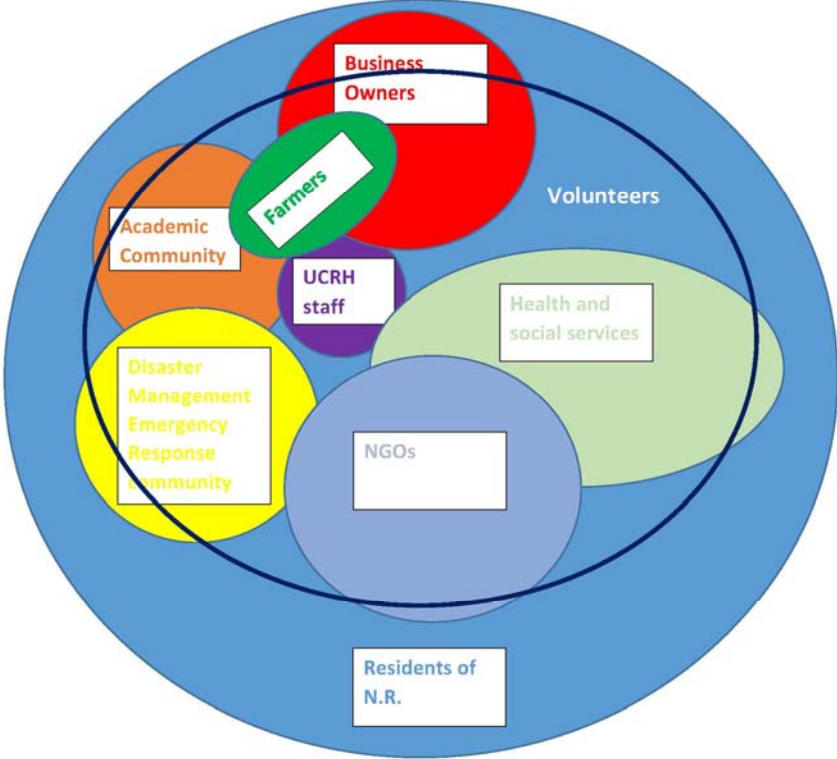
# Summary

- Our Community, our research
- Locally relevant useful research aiming to support development of community resilience, health services and health systems
- Could not have conducted research in the way that we did, without the high level of and type of community engagement
- Approach builds on resources and strengths in the community

# References

- Alderman, K., et al. (2012). "Floods and human health: A systematic review." Environ Int **47**: 37-47
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- Ramin B, Svoboda T. Health of the Homeless and Climate Change. *Journal of Urban Health : Bulletin of the New York Academy of Medicine.* 2009 05/15
- Stanke C, Murray V, Amlôt R, Nurse J, Williams R. The effects of flooding on mental health: Outcomes and recommendations from a review of the literature. *PLoS currents.* 2012 May 30;4

# The community



# Anecdote serves as a wider metaphor:

- Institutions/organisations/s services can struggle to be nimble in listening to community and identifying and responding to needs in a crisis, engaging at a personal level
- Agendas with institutions/organisations/s services
- Focus on 'services'
- UCRH possibly quicker and more flexible
- Able to design and execute research in a way that is based on engaging at personal level, listening and works in the community
- Neutrality (and centrality) of UCRH as an academic organisation
- Focus on support for MH as a 'side-effect' of other activities



# Community Engagement

## Activities/approaches:

- Many meetings early on making connections with the community, listening and trying to understand what was important to them, what might be useful to them
- Establishing the CAGs
- Establishing the RAG
- Recruitment of Maddie and Lee
- Maddie and Lee face-to-face networking - always approaching key post holders but also following up leads of who else might be useful to approach
- Recruitment of the door-to-door team
- Huge flexibility in the implementation of the study particularly in recruitment approaches (within the confines of agreed ethics approval)
- Census approach to the sample rather than random sampling – wanting the whole Northern Rivers community to be involved

# Final points

- Flood study serves as example of why locally-based rural research centres are important
- Academic institutions perceived as more neutral in the emotive environment of a disaster
- Delivering research in collaboration with an engaged participating community:
  - Listening
  - Flexibility
- Benefits of taking a community participation approach