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John Edwards is the manager of the Disaster Support and Recovery Unit, Community Services Victoria. He has had a considerable part to play in revising Victoria's arrangements for planning for, and management of recovery from emergencies and disasters. He was also instrumental in establishing a course for recovery managers at the Australian Counter Disaster College, Mt. Macedon, Victoria. He has direct experience of managing recovery including the central Victorian bushfires of January 1983 and the shootings at Hoddle and Queen Streets in the later part of 1987.

Images of dazed and distressed families evacuated from Darwin following Cyclone Tracy in 1974 and the anguish of those crushed in a train at Granville in 1977, attest to the toll disaster has taken in Australia. More recently, the devastation caused by the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983 and the senseless loss of life resulting from the Hoddle Street and Queen Street shootings in 1977, have again exposed how vulnerable the community is to sudden and unexpected disaster.

Out of Australia's direct experience with disaster has emerged an improved understanding about how communities, families and individuals best cope and recover when lives are threatened, homes destroyed and family life disrupted.

Central to this improved understanding has been:

1. the recognition that recovery is a complex process which typically occurs over many months and even years;
2. the appreciation that both the impact of disaster and the recovery process can place enormous stress on families and particularly children;
3. the realisation that many families are emotionally and financially stretched to the limit and usually require more than short term support and assistance;
4. the awareness that communities as well as families and individuals require support and assistance following disaster; and
5. the knowledge that recovery is best achieved where communities, families and individuals exercise self-determination.

As a result of this improved understanding, recovery from disaster is now recognised as a developmental process which requires co-ordination and management in its own right. This is in contrast to previous approaches to recovery which have tended to focus, almost entirely, on the provision of short term relief and welfare services.

However, it is regrettable that the helping

professions, and particularly in the field of social work, have been slow to perceive the frequency of disasters in our community and have not recognised the instrumental role they ought to have in assisting communities and families overcome the difficulties they encounter following disaster.

Further, it is important that the community recognise that the arrangements for dealing with the impact of disaster have, for far too long, been made in the context of agencies who have little expertise or experience in dealing with families and individuals who have been traumatised and have suffered great losses.

Notwithstanding the above? there are a number of indications that the helping professions and human services agencies are beginning to realise their responsibilities in this area.

Human service agencies are increasingly taking the lead in managing recovery although there is still considerable variation in recovery management arrangements throughout Australia. Indeed, Victoria has a new recovery plan which identifies Community Services Victoria as the principal recovery agency. This is a major innovation which for the first time has allowed recovery to be addressed within a human services framework, rather than as an appendage to the combating arrangements for emergency services.

Another major innovation has been the introduction of a national recovery management course at the Australian Counter Disaster College, Mt. Macedon. Already more than 150 senior human service managers from across the country have been trained and it is anticipated that these future participants will facilitate improved recovery arrangements in all the States and Territories.

This issue of Australian Child and Family Welfare has brought together an important collection of material which addresses much of the new thinking around community and family recovery from disaster. All of the authors have had extensive experience in the area of disaster recovery and I am confident that this will be a valuable resource for those who may be called upon to support and assist disaster affected families.

Finally, the helping professions must recognise that with population growth and the increased dispersal of communities the threats from both natural and man-made hazards are escalating. At the same time community expectations for support and assistance following disasters are rising. Consequently it is of paramount importance that recovery arrangements throughout Australia receive greater attention than is presently the case.