

Monday 7th March 2022

Floods and COVID-19: OzSAGE calls for urgent intervention in Northern NSW and Queensland

The floods in Northern NSW and Queensland are a public health catastrophe which will worsen the ongoing transmission of COVID-19 and increase the numbers of people with severe illness while the [local health systems are already compromised](#) by flooding and increased demand. The low COVID-19 vaccination rates in Northern Rivers area will make this area particularly high risk for COVID-19-related severe illness and deaths. [Northern NSW also has a large Aboriginal population](#) which is disproportionately affected by the floods.

All aspects of public health are connected

All aspects of public health are connected, and cascading failures may occur if any one aspect is not addressed. [At least 17 people have died](#) and large numbers of people are homeless, especially in NSW, crowded together in temporary accommodation or evacuation centres without access to a secure supply of [food](#), water, regular medications or [healthcare](#). Some are trapped by [mudslides and road collapses](#). Sanitation is a major risk, with environmental contamination by raw [sewage](#). There are immediate and delayed public health effects of floods. Immediate effects include injuries, hypothermia, medication shortage, worsening of chronic diseases, food and water shortage, lack of sanitation and carbon monoxide poisoning from use of gas generators. Delayed effects include epidemics (gastroenteritis, COVID-19, mosquito borne infections) and mental health problems. The Japanese encephalitis risk may increase, due to favourable conditions for mosquito breeding.

Local, untrained [civilians have mounted heroic rescue operations](#) and alongside the efforts of the SES and ADF are continue to play a major role and carry a large burden in cleanup and aid response. Greater capacity and support is urgently needed to mitigate this disaster.

COVID risk exacerbated with crowding and low vaccination rates

Large numbers of people are sheltering in crowded conditions, especially in the Northern Rivers region which has a low vaccination rate for COVID-19. This poses a risk of a major outbreak of COVID-19 with severe outcomes. The increased presence of mould and enhanced breeding of dust mites in housing due to the wet conditions during the recovery phase may exacerbate respiratory infections such as COVID-19. A surge in severe COVID-19 cases would not be met with adequate hospital or ICU beds, as the hospitals and staff have been affected by flooding. Health systems throughout NSW and Queensland already under considerable stress from COVID-19. The increased stresses on [hospital capacity due to the flood](#), injuries, exacerbation of chronic illness due to lack of medicine, greater number of gastroenteritis cases and other flood-related illness will leave few options for management of a high case load of severe COVID-19 and put further pressure on overworked staff

[Access to hospital and ICU care](#) is an important predictor of mortality from COVID-19. If people with severe COVID-19 cannot access hospital care, the death toll from COVID-19 will be disproportionately higher in flood-affected areas.

We call on state and Federal governments for:

1. Urgent provision of safe housing, food, power and communications for flood-displaced people.
2. Priority housing for health care and other frontline staff who are displaced due to flooding.
3. Urgent attention to sanitation, sewage disposal and safe water.
4. Urgent supplies of essential medicines, masks and COVID rapid antigen tests
5. Urgent expansion of health system and hospital capacity (including staffing) and evacuation plans to ensure adequate infrastructure for medical evacuation where needed.
6. Expansion of COVID and other infectious disease testing and public health laboratory capacity
7. Urgent vaccination campaigns for COVID-19 and other vaccine preventable diseases with mobile vaccination clinics deployed to affected areas.
8. Increased ADF logistics support to affected areas.
9. Establish surveillance for immediate and delayed health effects of the floods to enable rapid intervention when required.
10. Provide updated daily statistics on injury, illness and death arising from the floods and aftermath.
11. Counselling and support for communities undergoing multiple trauma events
12. Release the Federal Disaster Funds to enable the above.