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TRAVELLING AN UNCHARTED LAND

By Sarb Johal

As we mark two years since the initial earthquake in the current series Canterbury is experiencing, we journey into a confusingly different land and time for residents of the region and those who work with them.

Christchurch feels different. It is different. Every day, life is a challenge. It is easy to become caught up in the difficulty of making things work, of getting to places on time, or getting to them at all. These secondary impact issues are what is now primarily driving people to seek out services to help them.

Demand for help is likely to become apparent in different ways. Those who thought they could cope on their own may begin to discover they struggle to get through, as impacts on their lives and livelihoods start to accumulate. A high level of arousal and vigilance for further earthquakes (and the potential threat this brings to life and close contacts) means people are feeling drained and fatigued, with relatively little “wiggle-room” or extra capacity to help themselves or others, should they be called upon to deal with unexpected events. This has an impact on individuals and also community life, as community resources and network resilience or adaptive capacity are potentially degraded.

Living precariously

When people are this fatigued, they are likely to have little energy or space to do much planning for the future. This is consistent with the physiological consequences of living in a precarious environment with respect to earthquake vulnerability, and uncertainty about housing, income, rising costs and living day by day.

It is difficult to know when the need for post-earthquake counselling will peak. It is likely different people will present at different times. We know from the experience in Australia after bushfires that people asked for assistance for the first time perhaps two or three years after the event. Much will depend on how quickly secondary issues such as housing, land issues and re-building are resolved.

We know different people and communities

are likely to move forward through their recoveries at different speeds. People who seem to be coping and getting on reasonably in life may notice their lives have changed considerably since the earthquakes began. There are reports of people living more limited lives with less depth and breadth, although they may not be aware of this.

As this awareness begins to sink in, we can expect a period of reflection as people search for meaning and direction in their lives, including whether they wish to continue in their current employment and residential locations. This is a natural part of the recovery process. However, it also means people who were getting on with things reasonably well may start to come forward for assistance. Their needs may not fit so well with services as they are currently configured. Understanding how to meet these new needs will be critical in securing the well-being and development of the region.

Stress on the nursing workforce

Nurses, working as they do at many levels and sectors of health and social care, are ideally positioned to ensure people get access to the services they need. A survey by Massey University researcher Martin Woods has hinted that nurses are so “morally distressed”, nearly half of those surveyed have considered leaving their current positions and nearly a fifth want to leave immediately [see news story, p7.]

Although the sample surveyed was small, narratives of burnout and distress are not uncommon and need to be taken seriously, no matter which organisation nurses are working in. In this study, nurses described moral concerns over the delivery of less than optimal care, due to pressures from management to reduce costs. More and more nurses are likely to find themselves in scenarios where what they are being asked to do clashes with their deeply held values and practices.

This is not to deny we live in fiscally straitened times, and will continue to do so for a considerable period. However, it is revealing to me that one of the lessons of the Olympics was there are some things only large-scale public organisations can do. When G4S failed to meet their security services contract with just weeks to go until the start of the London Olympics, the United Kingdom Government turned to the unformed services to step into the breach. Indeed,

they performed admirably, but not at zero cost. The Armed Services estimate it will take them two years to return to usual practice, taking account of leave and training that was cancelled to meet the urgent need. Indeed, the experience has made an impression so deep, ministers are publicly questioning how the Government’s relationship with the private sector on projects that require deep resilience capacity should be approached in future.

The services required to meet the complex needs of individuals, communities and families in Christchurch, as the city and region are rebuilt, should reflect all interested parties – community groups, formal and informal, organised non-government organisations and statutory state organisations. But caution is required before contracting the work to bodies that may not have the resilience or flexibility to scale up their capacity, or to effectively change configuration, should they be called upon to do so. We can plan to meet the needs of the present, but good practice means we must build in contingency for the future – on a nationwide basis for all hazards, not just the Canterbury earthquakes or the last event we have had to cope with.

A different kind of marathon

Gone are the days of response and immediate recovery. The complexity of the task before us is writ large. It is a cliché to describe the journey before us as a marathon, not a sprint. But this is a different kind of marathon. It is not a flat, fast course where world records are likely to be broken. It is more likely the water stops will be infrequently found in the deepest of valleys and on the hottest of hills. The route will not be well marked – we will need to carry maps, look to the familiar stars to guide us when the land all around us is unfamiliar, and perhaps ask for help and directions as we journey together in this uncharted land. We will need to prepare well, and to bring what sustains us – both material things and our experiences of life lived and losses mourned. It is an opportunity for discovery, as well, of the road we must and will travel. Together. •

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