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BRISBANE SOUTH
An Australian Government Initiative

Disaster exercise toolkit for general practices

November 2026

NEW!: Contact us for bonus resources that will make it easy to run your exercise in line with new accreditation requirements
engagement@bsphn.org.au

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Disclaimer

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Additional copies

For additional copies of this toolkit, download the most recent version at **Prepare | Brisbane South PHN** or via the QR code

Contact

Enquiries regarding the content and any use of this document are welcome at:
engagement@bsphn.org.au

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Acknowledgement of Traditional Owners

Baugull nyungai

Gurumba bigi

Maroomba biggee

We acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we live and work, and of the many different nations across the wider Brisbane south region. We pay our respects to the Elders, past, present and emerging as the holders of the memories, the traditions, the culture and the spiritual wellbeing of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the nation. We acknowledge any Sorry Business that may be affecting the communities as a whole.

In the spirit of reconciliation, partnership and mutual respect, we will continue to work together with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to shape a health system which responds to the needs and aspirations of the community.



1. Introduction

Primary health networks (PHNs) play a role in supporting the preparedness and resilience of general practices so primary care services can continue operating during disasters and emergencies.

The *Disaster exercise toolkit for general practices* (the toolkit) has been developed by the Brisbane South PHN to support general practices in strengthening their all-hazards emergency preparedness through practical and accessible exercising.

Your local environment and risks will inform your approach to disaster and emergency planning, and regularly running mock exercises will test your practice's readiness for unexpected events.

This is a non-clinical disaster exercise toolkit. Resources include four disaster scenarios, allowing you to choose and scale an appropriate scenario that aligns with your practice's needs.

Purpose

The toolkit supports practices to:

- test and improve their emergency response plans (ERPs)*
- build staff capability and confidence in planning for and responding to disaster events
- maintain safe and continuous patient care during and after emergency events.

The toolkit provides a practical, scalable and easy-to-use exercising framework that can be delivered internally with minimal resources and experience.

*The practice needs to regularly test its plans for effectiveness.
RACGP Standards for General Practice 6th edition

ALL-HAZARDS

The focus is not on the hazard/scenario itself, but on how the practice identifies its own vulnerabilities and responds. Many of the actions, decisions and challenges explored will apply across different emergency events.

Why exercising matters

Exercises are practical learning activities that support continuous improvement and resilience.

Disasters can significantly impact a practice's ability to provide safe and continuous care. Exercising allows you to:

- practice decision-making in a safe environment
- clarify roles and responsibilities
- improve coordination and communication
- explore how systems, processes and contingencies will function during a disaster event
- identify areas for improvement in the practice and patient preparedness and response.

To access further resources please visit:

RACGP Standards 6th Edition (page 3)

Disaster readiness | Brisbane South PHN

or contact us at engagement@bsphn.org.au

What is a discussion-based exercise?

A discussion-based exercise is a facilitated conversation that allows participants to explore how they would respond to an emergency scenario. There is:

- no special equipment required
- no prior experience needed
- no right or wrong answers.

Exercises can be delivered in various formats:

- 30 minutes: Brief awareness session
- 90 minutes: Standard discussion exercise
- 120 minutes: Extended session.

For shorter sessions don't try to address all phases on the same day.

2. About the toolkit

The toolkit has been designed to:

- be simple and practical so individuals with minimal exercise experience can use it
- be flexible and scalable to different practice sizes, types and exercise experience
- support whole-of-practice participation
- encourage learning and collaboration (both internally and externally)
- align with all-hazards preparedness principles to maximise outcomes.

The toolkit provides a structured yet flexible approach for general practices to design and deliver emergency response exercises using realistic, scenario-based discussions.

Toolkit inclusions

The toolkit provides everything needed to run a simple exercise. Each resource is designed to be used in sequential order, starting with the user instructions.

Toolkit resource	Details
Toolkit user instructions (this document)	Step-by-step instructions on how to develop and deliver a successful exercise and strengthen response arrangements
Two-page facilitator quick start guide	A two-page guide for the facilitator to use when running the exercise
Appendix A Exercise scenarios	Choose from four pre-designed scenarios depicting different hazard types that are relevant to your region Discussion prompts and facilitation guidance are included throughout each scenario
Appendix B Exercise activity worksheet	Worksheet to capture discussion and decisions
Appendix C Debrief and improvement plan	Plan to capture participant feedback on what worked well and challenges they faced, as well as learning and improvement opportunities

IMPORTANT!

Mark all exercise correspondence EXERCISE ONLY and inform attendees that if a real emergency occurs during your exercise they should call out 'No duff'.

Advise participants of the importance of their psychological safety when exercising potentially traumatic events.*

RACGP - Caring for yourself and your team

INTENDED USERS

The toolkit is designed for use within general practices by practice managers, clinical leads or other nominated facilitators.

3. It starts with A,B,C...

The toolkit is designed to support you through three steps.

A **Develop your exercise**

B **Deliver your exercise**

C **Debrief and improve following your exercise**

Each step is supported by templates, guidance and ready-to-use materials. You can follow these step-by-step or adapt them to suit your practice's needs, available time and level of experience.

A Develop your exercise

Review

Before selecting a scenario, review your practice's emergency response plan (ERP). Consider:

- Have any issues or challenges been identified during previous emergencies or incidents?
- Are there any procedures staff are unfamiliar with that would be worthwhile testing?
- Are there any changes to staffing, services or systems that should be tested?

Review previous incident reports, lessons identified and feedback from staff who have experienced emergencies.

Choose a scenario

Four scenarios are provided in the toolkit. These can be found in Appendix A - Exercise scenarios.

Choose the scenario that best aligns with your practice's priorities, local risks or areas identified for improvement. On the following page you will find a brief outline of each scenario and the type of risks/issues/opportunities that they address.



Severe rainfall and flooding

Access disruption, vulnerable patients, alternative service delivery



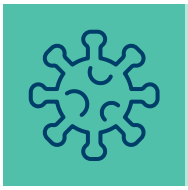
Bushfire

Staff safety, evacuations, displaced patients, situational awareness



Extreme heat

Vulnerable patient support, demand surge, staff wellbeing



Infectious disease outbreak

Infection control, workforce impacts, telehealth, prolonged response

Note: Practices may choose to exercise a scenario based on a real event they have previously experienced. While this can provide valuable learning opportunities, revisiting past emergencies may be distressing for some participants. Facilitators should consider participant wellbeing and psychological safety when selecting and delivering exercise scenarios.

Adapt the scenario to your practice

The scenarios can be used as provided or adapted to suit your local context.

For example, you could give your exercise a name (e.g. Exercise Firestorm) and include references to:

- local roads, suburbs and landmarks
- local hospitals, health networks, and emergency services
- practice demographics and patient groups
- available services and capabilities within your practice
- local information sources, including your local council disaster dashboards.

Logistics: What works for your practice?

- Will your exercise be in-person or online?
- An exercise might be as short as a 30-minute review of a recent power outage where you identify three opportunities for improvement.
- For a comprehensive exercise, we suggest 1.5 – 2 hours for the exercise and debrief. Consider whether there is available time in practice meetings or schedule time to deliver the exercise in one or more stand-alone sessions.
- Will you supply resources electronically or in hard copy? Resources could include an invitation, agenda, your practice's emergency response plan (ERP), forms from this toolkit (Appendix B and Appendix C), Accreditation Guidelines, etc.

Allocate exercise roles and responsibilities to support the exercise including:

Facilitator

Keeps discussions focused, encourages participation from all attendees and guides participants through each phase of the scenario

Completes the debrief and arranges for filing of all exercise documentation*

Scribe

Observes and records key discussions and outcomes during the exercise (using the exercise activity worksheet in electronic or hard form (see Appendix B)

Participants

Contribute to discussions in various ways including checking practice activities against recommendations in your practice's existing plans and procedures, and identifying opportunities to strengthen disaster preparedness and response arrangements

Can be given the option to complete some pre-reading prior to the exercise

Observers

External personnel can facilitate the exercise or attend in observer roles

Can include staff from other primary care providers or emergency management agencies

REMEMBER

- **Start simple - don't overcomplicate your first exercise.**
- **Choose a scenario that is relevant to your practice. Consider what impacts the practice has experienced before.**
- **Keep your objectives clear and focused.**
- **Consider including representatives from both clinical and non-clinical roles to ensure discussions reflect the full range of practice functions and responsibilities during an emergency.**
- **Invite an external person to facilitate the exercise if that works best for you.**

B Deliver your exercise

Before you start

The facilitator should have access to, and be familiar with, the selected exercise scenario, including the facilitator quick start guide.

The facilitator and scribe should have access to, and be familiar with, the scenario activities and the exercise activity worksheet (Appendix B).

Participants should understand the purpose of the exercise and have access to relevant plans, procedures or resources if required.

NOTE:

Facilitators do not need to be emergency management experts, however they should be familiar with the practice's emergency response planning arrangements.

Working through the scenario

Each scenario is divided into three phases that reflect the progression of an emergency event. For shorter exercises you may want to concentrate on only one or two phases.

Phase one
Prepare and plan

Discuss preparedness activities, monitoring arrangements, activation triggers and planning actions before impacts occur.

Phase two
Respond and adapt

Discuss immediate response actions, safety considerations, communication requirements and continuity of essential services.

Phase three
Sustain and recover

Discuss ongoing operations, workforce considerations, recovery planning and returning to normal business activities.

Use the exercise activity worksheet

Each phase includes an activity supported by an exercise activity worksheet (Appendix B). Use the worksheet to record and:

- identify potential consequences or emerging issues arising from the situation
- determine the immediate priorities for the practice
- discuss the decisions and actions required to manage the situation
- record responsibilities and any follow-up actions.

Facilitator guidance

A two-page facilitator quick start guide is included with the toolkit on page 12 and provides practical guidance for delivering the exercise.

Each phase also includes discussion prompts to support facilitation and encourage participants to consider relevant issues, risks, and response options.

These prompts are intended to guide discussion and can be adapted based on the experience, knowledge and priorities of the group.

NOTE:

For larger groups, consider splitting participants into smaller teams to complete the worksheet and report back on their observations, priorities and actions.

REMEMBER

The value of the exercise comes from discussion, shared learning and identifying opportunities to strengthen preparedness and response arrangements. The objective is not to complete every discussion question, but to have meaningful conversations about how the practice would respond during a real emergency.

Debriefing is a very important part of the exercise process. It provides an opportunity for participants to reflect on the discussion, identify strengths and challenges, and agree on practical actions to improve preparedness and response arrangements.

The purpose of the debrief is not to assess individual performance. Instead, it focuses on understanding what worked well, what could be improved and what changes may be required to strengthen the practice's ERP, procedures and preparedness activities.

On the following page you will find out how to conduct your debrief, develop an improvement plan and monitor your progress. The toolkit also includes an Exercise debrief and improvement plan (Appendix C) to support this process.

REMEMBER

Identifying gaps is a positive outcome. Exercises are designed to test arrangements and identify opportunities for improvement before a real emergency occurs.

A successful exercise is not one where everything works perfectly. A successful exercise is one that identifies opportunities to strengthen preparedness, response arrangements and continuity of patient care.

C Debrief and improve

Conducting the debrief

The debrief section of the template should be completed immediately following the exercise while discussions and observations remain fresh. Where possible, all exercise participants should contribute to the discussion, including the facilitator, the scribe and any observers involved in the exercise.

The debrief template is structured around the three exercise phases and provides a consistent approach to capturing:

- strengths and successful practices identified during the exercise
- challenges, gaps or issues requiring further consideration
- key observations, assumptions and lessons identified.

The completed activity worksheets, facilitator notes and participant feedback should be used to inform the discussion and capture observations within the debrief template.

For exercises delivered over multiple sessions, a short debrief can be completed at the end of each session, followed by a final debrief at the conclusion of the exercise.

Developing the improvement plan

The improvement plan section of the Exercise debrief and improvement plan (Appendix C) is used to review exercise findings and determine what actions are required to strengthen preparedness and response arrangements.

Unlike the debrief, the improvement plan does not need to be completed during the exercise session. It may be completed in the days following the exercise once activity worksheets, debrief notes, facilitator observations and participant feedback have been reviewed.

The improvement plan can be completed by the facilitator, practice manager, leadership team or other staff responsible for maintaining the practice's ERP and preparedness arrangements.

The improvement plan supports practices to:

- review whether updates to the ERP or supporting procedures are required
- confirm whether roles, responsibilities and escalation arrangements remain appropriate
- identify opportunities for additional training, exercising or awareness activities
- assign ownership and timeframes for improvement actions.

Not every observation identified during the debrief will require a formal action. The improvement planning process helps prioritise the most important changes and ensures responsibilities are clearly assigned.

Monitoring progress

Exercises provide the greatest value when lessons identified are translated into action.

Once completed, the improvement plan should be reviewed periodically to monitor progress against agreed actions and inform future updates to the practice's ERP, procedures and preparedness activities.

Future exercises will validate that improvements have been implemented and are achieving the intended outcome.

We welcome your feedback here by scanning the QR code or emailing us at engagement@bsphn.org.au

Two-page facilitator quick start guide!

Before facilitating an exercise, review the user instructions and make sure you're familiar with the exercise process and supporting materials.

The purpose of a discussion or desktop exercise is to provide a safe environment for participants to discuss how the practice would respond during an emergency, identify strengths and gaps in current arrangements, and support continuous improvement.

> **REMEMBER**
>
> **The exercise is designed to test plans and processes, not individuals. There are no right or wrong answers.**

Decide whether your exercise will include all or just one of the three phases, followed by a debrief.

- **Phase one: Prepare and plan,** for the disaster. Here, participants look at preparedness, activation triggers and planning.
- **Phase two: Respond and adapt,** immediate response actions, prioritisation and service continuity.
- **Phase three: Sustain and recover,** ongoing health impacts, recovery activities and return to normal business.

+

- **Debrief: Learn and improve,** reflect on lessons identified, improvement opportunities and next steps.

Note: A debrief will always be part of your exercise to ensure continuous improvement. It also provides closure for participants.

Introducing your exercise

At the start of the session, the facilitator should:

1. Welcome participants and explain the purpose of the exercise.
2. Ask participants if they have any questions.
3. State the exercise objectives.
4. Explain the scenario is fictional but based on realistic emergency situations.
5. Reinforce that there are no right or wrong answers.
6. Encourage open discussion and participation from all attendees.
7. Provide attendees with an agenda.

> **REMEMBER**
>
> **Create a safe environment.**
>
> **Start the exercise by reminding participants:**
>
> - **this is a learning activity**
> - **there are no wrong answers**
> - **to speak openly and respectfully.**

At **each phase** of the exercise, the facilitator should:

- Read the situation overview and current impacts aloud to participants.
- Allow participants a few minutes to consider the information provided.
- Work through each activity using the facilitation prompts provided in each phase of the selected scenario to guide discussion. (Note: It's not necessary to use all the prompts—they are there to help promote discussion.)
- Record key actions, responsibilities and any assumptions made in the exercise activity worksheet (Appendix B).

If discussion stalls or additional complexity is required, consider introducing one of the optional challenges mentioned in the scenarios.

Following your exercise

A debrief should be conducted while discussions and observations are still fresh. If there is insufficient time, a 'hot' debrief can be conducted and the facilitator can undertake a more extensive debrief after the exercise has been completed.

If you are running your exercise across multiple days, it is good psychological safety and closure practice to debrief participants at the conclusion of each session.

Refer to Step C—Debrief and improve in the User instructions and the Debrief and improvement plan (Appendix C) for information on conducting a great debrief!

NOTE

- Encourage contributions from all participants.
- Focus discussion on what the practice would realistically do.
- Explore roles, responsibilities and decision-making pathways.
- Capture differing views and discuss them openly.

Facilitator notes

Link to local disaster dashboard:

Links to practice plans:

Additional useful resources:

After you've completed the debrief and finished the exercise, remember to save all documents for accreditation!

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Exercise scenarios

Disaster exercise toolkit for general practices

Appendix A

Choose one of these four scenarios

Print out the relevant scenario card for your exercise attendees or attach electronically when you send out exercise invitations

Scenario one: Flood event



Timeframe: 12 hours' notice until impact

Why choose this scenario?

Flooding is one of the most common and disruptive hazards affecting south-east Queensland. This scenario focuses on how a practice responds when access to healthcare services is disrupted by road closures, infrastructure impacts and community isolation.

The exercise explores decision-making during a rapidly evolving emergency, communication with patients and staff, supporting vulnerable patients and adapting healthcare delivery when normal access to services is affected.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- emergency response activation and escalation
- communication during disruption
- supporting vulnerable patients
- alternative service delivery arrangements
- responding to emerging public health impacts.

Scenario two: Bushfire event



Timeframe: Rapid onset

Why choose this scenario?

Bushfires can create rapidly changing conditions that affect both the community and healthcare services. This scenario focuses on responding to escalating threats, supporting patients affected by evacuation and displacement, and making decisions when staff safety and service delivery are impacted.

The exercise explores how a practice balances patient care, workforce considerations and operational decision-making during a fast-moving emergency.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- emergency monitoring and situational awareness
- staff and patient safety considerations
- evacuation-related impacts
- support for displaced patients
- ongoing community health impacts.

Scenario three: Heatwave event



Timeframe: 24 hours' notice until impact

Why choose this scenario?

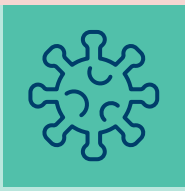
Extreme heat events can place significant pressure on healthcare services and disproportionately affect vulnerable members of the community. This scenario focuses on identifying and supporting patients at increased risk of harm, managing rising healthcare demand and maintaining staff wellbeing.

Unlike other emergencies, heatwaves often develop gradually, with more capacity to mitigate risks and undertake proactive communications with patients.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- identification of vulnerable patients
- proactive patient outreach and support
- demand surge management
- staff well-being and safety
- community health messaging and preventative care.

Scenario four: Infectious Disease Outbreak



Timeframe: Slow escalation, prolonged event

Why choose this scenario?

Infectious disease outbreaks present unique challenges for primary healthcare providers, often requiring sustained response activities over weeks or months. This scenario focuses on protecting staff and patients, implementing infection prevention and control measures, adapting service delivery, and maintaining healthcare access during prolonged periods of uncertainty.

The exercise explores how a practice responds when workforce availability, patient demand and public health requirements are all changing simultaneously.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- infection prevention and control arrangements
- patient triage and clinical workflows
- telehealth and alternative models of care
- workforce resilience and surge capacity
- communication during a prolonged emergency.



Scenario one
Flood Event

Why choose this scenario?

Flooding is one of the most common and disruptive hazards affecting south-east Queensland. This scenario focuses on how a practice responds when access to healthcare services is disrupted by road closures, infrastructure impacts and community isolation.

The exercise explores decision-making during a rapidly evolving emergency, communication with patients and staff, supporting vulnerable patients, and adapting healthcare delivery when normal access to services is affected.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- emergency response activation and escalation
- communication during disruption
- supporting vulnerable patients
- alternative service delivery arrangements
- responding to emerging public health impacts.



Objectives

1. Assess the practice's ability to recognise, monitor and respond to an escalating flood emergency.
2. Test decision-making, communication and coordination processes during an escalating flood emergency.
3. Evaluate arrangements to protect patients and staff safety while maintaining access to essential healthcare services.
4. Assess the management of vulnerable patients and flood-related public health risks when community access and healthcare pathways are disrupted.

Facilitator notes

Phase one

Prepare and plan

Situation overview
Day 1: 12 hours pre-impact
13:00 Monday

The Bureau of Meteorology has issued a Severe Weather Warning for your region, forecasting heavy rainfall over the next 48 hours with a high likelihood of flooding. Local authorities are advising residents in low-lying areas to monitor conditions closely and prepare for possible evacuation. While the practice remains fully operational, weather forecasts indicate conditions are likely to deteriorate overnight and into tomorrow. Community concern is growing, and local media coverage is focusing on potential impacts to roads, schools and essential services. Patients have begun contacting the practice seeking advice regarding medications, upcoming appointments and preparedness for possible disruption.

Current impacts

- Minor road closures have been reported across the region.
- Patients are contacting the practice regarding medication access and upcoming appointments.
- Weather forecasts indicate conditions may worsen significantly within 24–48 hours.
- Local schools and community organisations are sharing preparedness information.
- Some staff have expressed concerns about travelling to work if conditions deteriorate.

Activity: Preparing to respond

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

A patient requiring daily wound care contacts the practice advising they live in a flood-prone area and are concerned they may become isolated. Consider what actions the practice would take to support this patient, and if other patients with similar needs may also be impacted.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- How could flooding affect access to the practice, staff and patients over the next 24–48 hours?
- How will the practice monitor the developing situation (e.g. local council disaster dashboard, Queensland Health website)?
- Who is responsible for monitoring weather warnings, road closures and local advice?
- What actions can be taken now to minimise disruption to healthcare services?
- What information should be communicated to patients now? How will communication occur if conditions deteriorate?
- What preparations are required if staff are unable to travel to work?
- What indicators would trigger activation of the practice's emergency response arrangements?

Phase two

Respond and adapt

Situation overview
Day 2
08:00 Tuesday

Heavy rainfall overnight has resulted in widespread flooding across the region. Emergency services have responded to multiple flood rescues and several communities are experiencing significant access issues. A number of roads leading into town are now closed, with further closures expected throughout the day. Conditions remain unstable, with additional rainfall forecast over the next 24 hours. Healthcare services across the area are beginning to experience disruptions as patients and staff struggle to reach appointments and workplaces.

Current impacts

- Several staff members are unable to reach the clinic.
- Major roads are closed and public transport services are disrupted.
- Power outages are affecting parts of the community.
- Internet and phone connectivity are intermittent.
- Patients have missed appointments and are requesting telehealth support.
- Demand for scripts and healthcare advice is increasing.

Activity: Respond and adapt

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

The practice loses internet connectivity for several hours. Identify the additional consequential impacts, how they would be managed and by who.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What are the most significant impacts currently affecting healthcare delivery?
- Which patients require urgent support or prioritisation?
- How will the practice communicate operational changes to staff and patients?
- What alternative ways could healthcare services be delivered?
- What risks arise from power, internet or telecommunications disruptions?
- Are any issues escalating beyond the practice's existing arrangements?
- Who could be contacted to support?

Phase three

Sustain and recover

Situation overview
Day 5
11:00 Friday

Floodwaters have begun to recede across the region and emergency response operations are transitioning towards recovery. Many residents have begun returning to their homes and businesses to assess damage and commence clean-up activities. Community recovery hubs have been established and volunteers are assisting affected households. While access has improved in many areas, some communities remain isolated and many residents continue to experience disruption to housing, employment and essential services. Healthcare providers are beginning to see emerging health impacts associated with flood recovery activities and prolonged disruption to normal healthcare access.

Current impacts

- Vulnerable patients have experienced prolonged disrupted care, with some remaining isolated due to ongoing access issues.
- Patients who were unable to attend appointments are trying to book back in, increasing wait times and limiting access to those most in need.
- Community members are seeking advice regarding health risks in returning to flood-impacted homes and clean-up.
- Staff fatigue is becoming evident.
- There are reports of large numbers of volunteers arriving to help with local community clean-up who are not wearing appropriate PPE when accessing flood-impacted properties.

Activity: Sustain and recover

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients, including the days, weeks and months following the event.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What health issues are likely to emerge in the days and weeks following a flood event?
- Which patients require follow-up because of disrupted access to care, or in light of the impacts of the flood?
- How will increased demand from delayed appointments be managed?
- What public health messages should be reinforced following flooding?
- How might the practice assist with community recovery?
- What workforce challenges may emerge during prolonged operations?

Scenario two

Bushfire Event

Why choose this scenario?

Bushfires can create rapidly changing conditions that affect both the community and healthcare services. This scenario focuses on responding to escalating threats, supporting patients affected by evacuation and displacement, and making decisions when staff safety and service delivery are impacted.

The exercise explores how a practice balances patient care, workforce considerations and operational decision-making during a fast-moving emergency.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- emergency monitoring and situational awareness
- staff and patient safety considerations
- evacuation-related impacts
- support for displaced patients
- recovery and ongoing community health impacts.

Objectives

1. Assess the practice's ability to recognise, monitor and respond to escalating bushfire threats.
2. Test decision-making, communication and coordination processes during rapidly changing emergency conditions.
3. Evaluate arrangements to protect patient and staff safety when bushfire activity threatens the community and healthcare services.
4. Assess the management of displaced patients and emerging community health needs resulting from evacuation, displacement and bushfire impacts.

Facilitator notes

Phase one

Prepare and plan

Situation overview
Day 1

The region is experiencing extreme fire danger conditions following several weeks of hot, dry weather. Forecast temperatures are expected to exceed 40°C over the coming days, accompanied by strong winds and low humidity. Emergency services have issued warnings advising residents to monitor conditions closely and prepare their bushfire plans. While there are currently no immediate threats to the practice, several bushfires are burning elsewhere in the state, and smoke is beginning to affect local air quality. Community concern is increasing, particularly among patients with respiratory conditions and those living near bushland areas. Local media coverage is focused on fire weather conditions and preparedness messaging.

Current impacts

- Air quality is beginning to deteriorate.
- Community concern is increasing due to media reporting.
- Emergency services are issuing regular situation updates.
- Staff are monitoring local conditions and travel routes.
- Forecast conditions are expected to worsen over the next 24–48 hours.

Activity: Prepare and plan

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles or individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

A nearby aged care facility advises that several residents with respiratory conditions may require additional support if air quality continues to deteriorate.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What impacts could the escalating fire conditions, smoke and potential road closures have on the practice, staff and patients?
- How will the practice monitor the developing situation? Who is responsible for monitoring weather warnings, road closures and local advice?
- Which patient groups may require early planning or communication if conditions deteriorate (e.g. local council disaster dashboard, Queensland Health website)?
- How will the practice monitor bushfire warnings, air quality alerts and emergency service advice?
- What would trigger activation of the practice's emergency response arrangements?

Phase two

Respond and adapt

Situation overview
Day 2

A bushfire is now burning within close proximity to the community. Strong winds have caused the fire to spread rapidly, and emergency warnings have been issued for several nearby suburbs. Thick smoke is affecting visibility and air quality across the region. Evacuation centres have been established and many residents have left their homes with little notice. Emergency services are heavily committed to firefighting operations and are warning that conditions may continue to change throughout the day. The practice remains open but is experiencing increased demand from community members seeking healthcare advice, medication support and treatment for smoke-related health issues.

Current impacts

- Air quality is hazardous across the community.
- Evacuation orders have been issued for nearby areas.
- Displaced residents are presenting without medications or prescriptions.
- Presentations for respiratory symptoms and eye irritation are increasing.
- Staff are concerned about their own families and properties.
- Travel disruptions are affecting access to healthcare services.

Activity: Respond and adapt

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles or individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

Two staff members receive evacuation orders for their homes and advise they may need to leave immediately to support family members.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What new impacts are emerging because of the bushfire, smoke and evacuations?
- Which patient needs should be prioritised to maintain safe care during this period?
- What actions are required to support displaced patients, replacement prescriptions and increased presentations for smoke-related illness?
- How will staff wellbeing and workforce availability be managed if employees are directly affected by the bushfire?
- What service delivery adjustments may be required if travel disruptions continue or conditions deteriorate further?
- What information should be communicated to patients, staff and partner organisations?

Phase three

Sustain and recover

Situation overview
Two weeks later

The immediate bushfire threat has passed and emergency warnings have been downgraded. Recovery activities are continuing across the region and many residents are returning to damaged properties while others remain in temporary accommodation. Community recovery centres have been established. Volunteers are assisting with clean-up and rebuilding activities. Smoke from lingering hotspots continues to affect air quality, and local services are reporting increasing demand for support. Healthcare providers are beginning to see emerging health impacts associated with prolonged smoke exposure, disrupted healthcare access, property loss and physical demands of recovery activities.

Current impacts

- Presentations related to anxiety, stress and sleep disturbance are increasing.
- Ongoing respiratory symptoms are being reported due to smoke exposure.
- Some residents remain displaced or are living in temporary accommodation.
- Patients are seeking replacement prescriptions and re-establishment of routine care.
- Community recovery activities are under way, including clean-up of damaged properties.
- Staff fatigue is becoming evident following prolonged response activities.

Activity: Sustain and recover

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients, including the days, weeks and months following the event.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles or individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

A community recovery centre advises that volunteers assisting with clean-up activities are presenting with minor injuries, dehydration and smoke-related symptoms. The centre has put a call out seeking support from local healthcare providers.

Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What longer-term or ongoing health impacts may emerge in the coming weeks and months?
- Which patients may require proactive follow-up due to disrupted care, displacement or ongoing health concerns?
- What actions are required to restore routine services while continuing to support recovery needs?
- How can the practice support patients experiencing mental health impacts, ongoing respiratory issues or recovery-related injuries?
- What workforce pressures or wellbeing concerns need addressing following a prolonged response?
- What opportunities are there for the practice to contribute to broader community recovery and future preparedness?

Scenario three

Heatwave Event

Why choose this scenario?

Extreme heat events can place significant pressure on healthcare services while disproportionately affecting vulnerable members of the community. This scenario focuses on identifying and supporting patients at increased risk of harm, managing rising healthcare demand and maintaining staff wellbeing during a prolonged event.

Unlike other emergencies, heatwaves often develop gradually, providing an opportunity to explore preventative actions and proactive patient engagement.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- identification of vulnerable patients
- proactive patient outreach and support
- demand surge management
- staff wellbeing and safety
- community health messaging and preventative care.

Objectives

1. Assess the practice's ability to recognise, monitor and respond to prolonged extreme heat conditions.
2. Test decision-making, communication and coordination processes during increasing healthcare demand.
3. Evaluate arrangements to protect patient and staff safety during sustained environmental stress.
4. Assess the identification, prioritisation and proactive support of patients at increased risk of heat-related illness and adverse health outcomes.

Facilitator notes

Phase one

Prepare and plan

Situation overview

Three days before forecast peak temperatures

The Bureau of Meteorology has forecast a prolonged heatwave, with temperatures expected to exceed 38°C for at least four consecutive days and potentially remain above average for more than a week. Public health authorities have issued heat-health warnings, encouraging vulnerable community members to take precautions and remain hydrated. Local media are reporting concerns about increased pressure on health services, electricity demand and risks to older people, young children and those living with chronic health conditions. The practice is operating normally. However, patients have begun seeking advice about medications, heat-related illness and how to stay safe during the forecast conditions.

Current impacts

- Public health alerts have been issued.
- Vulnerable patients are contacting the practice for advice.
- Concerns regarding medication management are increasing.
- Local aged care providers are reviewing heatwave plans.
- Community awareness of the forecast is growing.
- Temperatures are expected to continue to increase over coming days.

Activity: Prepare and plan

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

An aged care provider requests assistance identifying residents at highest risk during the forecast heatwave.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What impacts could the forecast heatwave have on vulnerable patients, staff and practice operations over the coming days?
- Which patient groups may require early planning, communication or proactive support before temperatures peak?
- What actions could be taken now to reduce the risk of heat-related illness and disruption to patient care?
- How will the practice monitor heat-health warnings, public health advice and changing local conditions (e.g. local council disaster dashboard, Queensland Health website)?
- What staffing, infrastructure or service delivery issues could emerge during a prolonged heatwave?
- What would trigger activation of the practice's emergency response arrangements?

Phase two

Respond and adapt

Situation overview
Day 3 of the heatwave

Temperatures have exceeded 40°C for several consecutive days, with overnight temperatures remaining unusually high. Health services across the region are reporting increased presentations for dehydration, heat stress and worsening chronic medical conditions. Demand for healthcare advice is rising as community members seek support to manage the ongoing heat. Public health messaging is urging people to avoid outdoor activities and regularly check on vulnerable family members and neighbours. Concerns are also emerging regarding the ability of some residents to access cooling, particularly older adults living alone and people experiencing social isolation.

Current impacts

- Presentations for dehydration and heat stress are increasing.
- Exacerbations of chronic illnesses are becoming more common.
- Appointment demand is rising.
- Several vulnerable patients have limited access to cooling.
- Staff are reporting fatigue and discomfort.
- Concerns exist regarding maintaining a safe clinic environment.

Activity: Respond and adapt

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

A local power outage affects the practice for several hours, disrupting air conditioning, refrigeration and access to some clinical systems.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What new impacts or risks are emerging as the heatwave continues?
- Which patients should be prioritised for assessment, treatment or proactive follow-up?
- What actions are required to support patients experiencing heat-related illness or limited access to cooling?
- How will increased demand for appointments, advice and clinical care be managed?
- What measures are required to maintain staff wellbeing and a safe working environment?
- What operational adjustments may be required if conditions continue or worsen?

Phase three

Sustain and recover

Situation overview
Day 7 of the heatwave

The heatwave has continued well beyond initial forecasts and cumulative impacts are becoming evident across the community. Healthcare services remain under pressure as vulnerable individuals who initially coped at home begin experiencing worsening health outcomes. Public health authorities continue to issue heat-health advice, while local hospitals are reporting increased demand for emergency care. Community fatigue is becoming apparent, and concerns are growing about the ongoing effects of prolonged exposure to extreme temperatures. The practice is continuing to manage increased patient demand while balancing staff wellbeing and maintaining essential healthcare services.

Current impacts

- High-risk patients are beginning to deteriorate.
- Health system demand remains elevated.
- Staff fatigue is increasing.
- Community concern remains high.
- Routine services are under pressure.
- Extended heat exposure is affecting vulnerable populations.

Activity: Sustain and recover

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients, including the days, weeks and months following the event.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What longer-term health impacts may emerge following prolonged exposure to extreme heat?
- Which patient groups may require ongoing monitoring, follow-up or additional support?
- What actions are required to maintain essential healthcare services while managing sustained demand?
- How can the practice support patients whose health has deteriorated during the heatwave?
- What workforce pressures, fatigue or wellbeing concerns may need to be addressed?
- What lessons or improvements should be identified to strengthen preparedness for future heat events?

Scenario four

Infectious Disease Outbreak

Why choose this scenario?

Infectious disease outbreaks present unique challenges for primary healthcare providers, often requiring sustained response activities over weeks or months. This scenario focuses on protecting staff and patients, implementing infection prevention and control measures, adapting service delivery and maintaining healthcare access during prolonged periods of uncertainty.

The exercise explores how a practice responds when workforce availability, patient demand and public health requirements are all changing simultaneously.

This scenario is ideal for practices wanting to test:

- infection prevention and control arrangements
- patient triage and clinical workflows
- telehealth and alternative models of care
- workforce resilience and surge capacity
- communication during a prolonged emergency.

Objectives

1. Assess the practice's ability to recognise, monitor and respond to an emerging infectious disease threat.
2. Test decision-making, communication and coordination processes during a prolonged public health emergency.
3. Evaluate arrangements to protect patient and staff safety while maintaining essential healthcare services.
4. Assess infection prevention and control measures, patient triage processes and workforce management during sustained disease transmission.

Facilitator notes

Phase one

Prepare and plan

Situation overview
Day 1

Health authorities have identified a novel respiratory illness overseas, with confirmed cases now reported interstate and a small number detected locally. While information about the illness is still emerging, public health agencies have begun issuing guidance to healthcare providers regarding case identification, testing and infection prevention measures. Media coverage is increasing and members of the public are seeking information about symptoms, transmission risks and travel implications. Although the practice is operating normally, there is growing awareness that healthcare services may play a significant role should local transmission increase. Staff and patients are beginning to seek reassurance and advice.

Current impacts

- Public health guidance is beginning to emerge.
- Patients are calling with questions about symptoms and testing.
- Media coverage is increasing community concern.
- Staff are seeking information and clarification.
- Local cases have been identified.
- Healthcare providers are being encouraged to remain vigilant.

Activity: Prepare and plan

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles or individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

A patient who attended the clinic yesterday advises they have symptoms consistent with the illness.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What impacts could increasing local cases have on patients, staff and practice operations in the coming weeks?
- Which patient groups may require early communication, advice or alternative care arrangements?
- How will the practice monitor public health advice and ensure staff remain informed as the situation evolves (e.g. local council disaster dashboard, Queensland Health website)?
- What workforce, PPE, infrastructure or service delivery issues may emerge if local transmission increases?
- What would trigger activation of the practice's emergency response arrangements?

Phase two

Respond and adapt

Situation overview
Four weeks later

Community transmission is now established, and case numbers are increasing rapidly across the region. Public health authorities have introduced additional infection prevention requirements and are issuing frequent updates as the situation evolves. Demand for healthcare advice, respiratory assessment and testing has increased significantly, placing pressure on primary care services. Community anxiety is high, and many people are seeking reassurance, information and treatment. Several healthcare providers are experiencing staffing challenges due to illness, exposure requirements and caring responsibilities. The practice must rapidly adapt its operations while continuing to meet the healthcare needs of the community.

Current impacts

- Demand for testing and respiratory assessment is increasing.
- New infection control requirements have been introduced.
- Staff absences are increasing.
- PPE usage has increased significantly.
- Telehealth demand is rising.
- Community concern remains high.

Activity: Respond and adapt

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

Three staff members are required to isolate following a workplace exposure.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What new impacts or risks are emerging as community transmission increases?
- Which services and patient groups should be prioritised to maintain safe care?
- What actions are required to manage increased demand for assessment, testing, advice and treatment?
- How will infection prevention measures be implemented and maintained within the practice?
- What strategies could be used to manage workforce shortages and reduce staff exposure risks?
- What operational adjustments may be required to maintain service delivery, including telehealth or alternative models of care?

Phase three

Sustain and recover

Situation overview
Several months later

The practice has been operating under pandemic conditions for an extended period, with ongoing transmission continuing across the community. While emergency arrangements are now well established, prolonged demand is placing pressure on patients, staff and healthcare systems. Telehealth services are widely used, but delayed appointments and deferred care are creating additional challenges. Mental health concerns, workforce fatigue and chronic disease complications are becoming increasingly common. Public health advice continues to evolve as new evidence emerges, requiring ongoing adjustments to clinical workflows, communication approaches and service delivery arrangements.

Current impacts

- Deferred care backlogs are emerging.
- Staff fatigue and burnout are increasing.
- Mental health presentations are rising.
- Public health guidance continues to change.
- Telehealth remains heavily utilised.
- Chronic disease complications are becoming more common.

Activity: Sustain and recover

As a group, review the situation and current impacts.

- Identify the potential consequences or emerging issues that may affect the practice, staff or patients, including the days, weeks and months following the event.
- Discuss the immediate priorities for the practice in response to the situation.
- Identify the decisions and actions required to manage the impacts and maintain safe patient care.
- Record the roles of individuals responsible for actions, decisions and follow-up activities.

Optional challenge:

A new variant has emerged, resulting in revised public health advice and increased community concern.



Facilitator prompts

Use the following questions to guide discussion.

- What longer-term impacts are emerging for patients, staff and practice operations?
- Which patient groups may require proactive follow-up due to delayed care, chronic disease complications or mental health concerns?
- What actions are required to address service backlogs while maintaining ongoing care?
- How can staff wellbeing, fatigue and workforce sustainability be managed during a prolonged response?
- What processes are needed to monitor and implement ongoing changes to public health guidance?
- What lessons or improvements should be identified to strengthen preparedness for future infectious disease events?

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Exercise activity worksheet

Disaster exercise toolkit for general practices

Appendix B

Phase one – Prepare and plan

Potential consequence or impact from situation	Immediate priority	Actions and decisions required	Responsibility and follow up
Example: flooding may impact clinic over next 24-48 hours	Prepare for service disruption	Review emergency response plan and when to activate emergency response arrangements	Practice manager

Phase two – Respond and adapt

Potential consequence and impact from situation	Immediate priority	Actions and decisions required	Responsibility and follow up
Example: Patients unable to attend appointments	Continue patient care	Convert appointments to telehealth where possible	Administration team

Phase three – Sustain and recover

Potential consequence and impact from situation	Immediate priority	Actions and decisions required	Responsibility and follow up
Example: Ongoing staff fatigue	Maintain workforce wellbeing	Review staffing arrangements and implement wellbeing measures	Practice manager

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Exercise debrief and improvement plan

Disaster exercise toolkit for general practices

Appendix C

Part one: Exercise debrief

Depending on how the exercise is to be delivered, a debrief can be delivered after each phase, or collectively in one session. If the exercise is to be delivered over multiple days or sessions, it is recommended that a short debrief is incorporated at the end of each session.

Exercise details	[Provide a brief overview of the scenario used for the exercise]
Date	[Date/s of exercise]
Participants	[List of participants or teams involved in exercise, including anyone that was unable to participate]

PHASE ONE - Prepare and plan

Focus areas relating to emergency response planning

- ✓ Preparedness to respond to event
- ✓ Triggers for activating response plan
- ✓ Roles and responsibilities
- ✓ Communication arrangements and support for patients pre-event

What worked well and why?
Identify strengths, successful actions, effective processes or positive observations from the exercise.

Example: Staff were familiar with the emergency response plan and their roles and responsibilities

What challenges or gaps were identified?
Identify any issues, uncertainties, barriers or areas requiring improvement.

Example: No clear trigger for when to activate emergency response plan procedures

Additional observations from phase
Capture any key assumptions, decisions made, lessons identified to support improvement plan review.

Example: Establish activation triggers and escalation pathways for emergency response arrangements

PHASE TWO - Respond and adapt

Focus areas relating to emergency response planning

- ✓ Prioritisation and decision-making
- ✓ Actions required to safely respond to escalating situation

What worked well and why?

Identify strengths, successful actions, effective processes or positive observations from the exercise.

Example: Telehealth enabled continuity of care

What challenges or gaps were identified?

Identify any issues, uncertainties, barriers or areas requiring improvement.

Example: No clear process on when clinic closure needs to be considered

Additional observations from phase

Capture any key assumptions, decisions made, lessons identified to support improvement plan review.

Example: Develop clear indicators for when to trigger clinic closure and divert to remote working

PHASE THREE - Sustain and recover

Focus areas relating to emergency response planning

- ✓ Managing ongoing health and community impacts
- ✓ Continuation of care are services following the initial event impacts

What worked well and why?

Identify strengths, successful actions, effective processes or positive observations from the exercise.

Example: Staff demonstrated flexibility and teamwork

What challenges or gaps were identified?

Identify any issues, uncertainties, barriers or areas requiring improvement.

Example: Participants did not consider external stakeholders (PHN, community recovery support) to help support staff and patients

Additional observations from phase

Capture any key assumptions, decisions made, lessons identified to support improvement plan review.

Example: Review and update escalation pathways and stakeholder network support

Part two: Improvement plan

Reviewing your emergency response plan

Based on the exercise discussion and debrief feedback, consider whether any updates are required to the practice's emergency response plan (ERP) or supporting procedures.

Consideration	Yes	No	Comments
Were there any gaps in the current ERP?	☐	☐	
Are roles and responsibilities clearly documented and defined?	☐	☐	
Are supporting resources and contact lists up to date?	☐	☐	
Are communication processes clear and easily understood by all staff?	☐	☐	
Were continuity of care processes appropriate to the scenario?	☐	☐	
Were escalation pathways (internal and external) clear and well understood?	☐	☐	
Are updates to the practice's ERP required?	☐	☐	
Are additional training or exercising activities required?	☐	☐	

Improvement actions

What can be improved? Identify practical and achievable actions that will strengthen preparedness and response arrangements.

Action	Owner	Timeframe
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Overall reflection

Following this exercise, how confident are participants that the practice could effectively respond to a similar event?

☐ **Very confident**	☐ **Confident**	☐ **Somewhat confident**	☐ **Not yet confident**

Key takeaway

Part three: Monitoring progress

Item	Complete
Improvement actions assigned	☐
Emergency response plan review scheduled	☐
Relevant procedures updated	☐
Staff informed of agreed changes	☐
Future exercise scenario identified	☐

Proposed date for next exercise:

Congratulations!

We hope the exercise met your objectives.

It is important that we continue to improve, so any feedback on your practice learning or suggested improvements to the toolkit will be greatly appreciated

Complete our short online survey here or by scanning the QR code.
You can also provide us with your feedback at engagement@bsphn.org.au

To access further preparedness resources visit Disaster readiness | Brisbane South PHN

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