

I'm a final year medical student based in Melbourne. I am grateful for this opportunity to contribute to the collective rethinking of how the Commonwealth can respond better to future national crises.

Something I learned from my experience during COVID-19 is that, as a fairly typical Australian, it's national and international scale crises that have the most risk. COVID-19 has killed 30 times more Australians than every bushfire in recorded Australian history combined. As a medical student, working in hospitals and vaccination clinics throughout the pandemic, I saw how difficult it was for patients and clinicians alike.

Since my first year of medical school in 2018, our public health lecturers warned us regularly that a pandemic would be imminent, and that we were underprepared. However, in early 2020 politicians were calling the COVID-19 pandemic "unprecedented". To me, this sounded like an excuse for being surprised and ill-prepared, and this is certainly how it felt on a day-to-day basis in hospitals. However as medical students, we learn that COVID-19 was not at all unprecedented. Between the Spanish Flu and the Black Death, human history has been devastated many times by such events.

Given that pandemics are not that rare, and are hugely consequential, I think it was highly problematic emergency managers were not ready. This ill-preparedness trickled down to hospitals and communities with devastating impacts, many of which are still coming to light.

Looking forward, what worries me is that there are similar hazards that are plausible and could be hugely consequential – further pandemics, nuclear war, global armed conflict, volcanic eruptions causing famine, or threats from space weather. Reviewing Government's documents, including the AGCMF, it seems like we don't even have specific plans for these kinds of threats. Any rethinking of Commonwealth capability should be focused on these catastrophic hazards that are likely to impact the average Australian, and making sure we have the plans and capabilities we need to manage them at a national level. All-hazards, catastrophic disaster planning should be a critical part of any nation's approach to emergency management – but Australia's governments focus only on regularly occurring natural disasters.

Australia recognises the importance of an all-hazards approach in its big-picture planning documents and its international commentary, but almost always restricts particular programs, initiatives and announcements to "natural hazards". NEMA's remit is all-hazards, but it frames its work in the context of "devastating fires and floods". The

Minister for Emergency Management bizarrely described NEMA in its first birthday press release as the “federal **natural** disaster management” agency - contrary to its actual remit. None of the headline achievements the Minister relayed in that release relate to human-caused disasters or catastrophic disasters. None of the \$400m in funding to risk reduction projects specifically addressed catastrophic disasters.

This isn't the first time NEMAs neglect of its “all-hazard role” has been raised by stakeholders. Regardless of the cause and history, this consultation is an opportunity to adopt a balanced and risk-driven approach. As an Australian, I don't care whether a disaster that threatens my life or the life of my family or fellow Australians is caused by nature or humans (or if that distinction is even meaningful). I don't want unclear agency responsibilities or divisions between the States and Commonwealth to mean that the big-risks governments ought to be addressing as a priority are being neglected.

I appreciate that one of the reasons people might be reluctant to think about large-scale risks is that you can feel powerless to address them. However, when I think about really big problems, their large scale means even a marginal change can have a large overall impact. I think the following changes could have big positive impact:

Recommendations

Further investment towards a cause – like bushfires – suffers diminishing returns. No matter how optimised our decision-making, the best we can hope to do is to support “the next best project” and chase dimension returns. Given catastrophic or existential risks and human-caused hazards are neglected, Government should increase their priority and have a real positive impact on overall risk.

Having a plan, consulting with relevant stakeholders, and regularly exercising the plan is remarkably cheap when compared to physical risk mitigations. NEMA is proud to have committed more than \$3.85 billion in recovery assistance and \$400 million to risk reduction programs like flood levees and cyclone shelters. In that context, the cost for NEMA to develop and maintain a national plan specifically for each kind of catastrophic disaster type across an all-hazard spectrum is tiny. Having and exercising plans would reduce risk and create a pathway for finding other high-impact risk mitigations.

Overall, what really matters is that we build capabilities that address the actual risks that Australians are facing. While these big risks are rarely in the news and we aren't reminded of them every season, they are the biggest danger we face. I hope that the Government takes them seriously.

Thank you for your consideration.