A heartfelt acknowledgement

To the unsung heroes who are enduring the drought: the drought counsellors who were often both professional helpers in an unfamiliar territory and also victims of the drought in their personal lives; the farmers and their families who are suffering over the long term, stoically and without certainty of if and when it will end; the business people and their families who are affected (often without acknowledgement) by the drought; to the legion of friends and colleagues who provide support to each other; and to the communities who are digging deep over the exhausting long term impact of the drought and other adverse changes affecting rural Victoria, we dips our lids to you.

 Whilst the drought and especially its effects are far from over - our direct support role is for the moment - finished. We hope the job of providing support to the drought counsellors and of facilitating the documentation of your practice wisdom and the experience of the people you worked with, and of adding to the knowledge of providing effective ways to respond to an insidious and pervasive long term natural disaster, has been done respectfully. We wish all the workers who are continuing to directly support communities affected by drought, and those communities, all the very best.

Jeff Young on behalf of The Bouverie Team: Michelle Wills, Tina Whittle, Shane Wei, Elena Tautdasky, Pam Rycroft, Colin Riess, Kerry Proctor, Judy Pall, Amaryll Perlez, Hannah Moon, Carmel Hobbs

Thanks also to the Department of Human Services (DHS), Victoria, which had the vision to allow us to provide support to the state-funded drought counsellors in creative and flexible ways and who also funded projects such as No Bull Support and Looking Out For Your Neighbours that emerged during the project. A special thanks to Sue Hughes and Sally Rose who were our direct links with DHS.

Thanks also to incinct (www.inincinct.com.au) for allowing us to use your fantastic cartoons in No Bull for a nominal fee. Thank you for your support of the drought response.

INDEX

Welcome to this ‘Research Feedback Special’ of No Bull: the newsletter of the state-funded Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers. This is the 6th edition of No Bull, the biggest and possibly the last, as the formal support role by The Bouverie Centre and funded by DHS comes to an end in September 2008. It has been an absolute privilege for my team to be let into the lives of rural people heroically battling the long-term impacts of drought and the even longer term impacts of social, economic and climate change via the work of the Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers. It has been an extremely steep learning curve for me and my team at The Bouverie Centre but we have been generously informed by the creative, practical, dedicated and persistent work of our rural colleagues.

Although not typically referred to as heroes, the people enduring this drought, and the people supporting them, are heroes - because their actions over the course of this long and pervasive disaster are clearly heroic. People affected by chronic insidious hardships, whether drought, chronic illness or mental health problems, typically don’t get the social acknowledgement afforded to people suffering more acute and tangible hardships. In recognition of this discrepancy, some might say unfairness, we have penned an acknowledgement on page 24, rather than the usual resources; our intent is sincere not grandiose.

My intention was to dedicate a large amount of this newsletter to all the Cooperative Inquiry Groups (CIGs), but they are in a period of transformation, with many of the State-funded workers seeking new jobs as their contracts come to an end and so No Bull did not want to add to their workload. Instead, we have highlighted only a small selection of the many innovative and creative projects that are occurring across the state and have focused on the research, which the Bouverie Centre continue to collaborate with the CIG network.

My colleagues and I felt that it would be respectful to give back to the field the knowledge they shared with us. The research documented the hard-won knowledge of drought counselling work from 200 hours of CIG discussions involving over120 workers in 30 different locations across Victoria between February 2007 and September 2008.

As you can see from the pages that follow, the collected wisdom of the Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers and their clients is impressive and will add to the practice-based evidence of drought counselling. The key recommendations, for example, which we hope will inform policy, are presented in the middle pages (12-13). I have only selected a small number of key elements of the research to present in this edition. Greater detail is available in the interim report, which documents the work between February 2007 – February 2008. At over 90 pages, it is a daunting read but full of practice wisdom. Most of the CIGs are going to continue post Bouverie’s formal involvement, which is a great outcome of the research. In fact, the CIG groups seem to be growing in size rather than diminishing. Furthermore, Tasmania’s drought counsellors have based their network on our CIG structure – another good outcome. A final report will be available at the end of the year, based on a more detailed analysis of the data and of the whole period December 2006 – September 2008. All reports will be available at www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie

Much has been achieved but many tasks remain. Continuing to develop and document the work is important so that specialist drought knowledge can be directly transferred to the rural organisations and service providers who have an ongoing role. Another task is to continue the networking and co-ordination of services that has happened. The impact of the drought will continue for some people for many years, even if rain has fallen. Some areas have less water now than at the same time last year. There is concern across the CIGs that further crises will be precipitated when EC financial support, which is currently keeping many businesses viable, ends.

You will notice photos depicting rural life and the drought throughout this edition. They come from two innovative projects: A day in the life of rural Victoria, a free travelling photographic exhibition managed by VicRelief Foodbank, and Beyond reasonable drought – a series of professional photographs taken by MAPs (Many Australian Photographers) group, a non-profit association of 80 emerging and well known photographers, striving to capture the impact of drought on the Australian landscape.

Whilst Bouverie’s formal role comes to an end, the relationships we have developed with rural Victoria will not, and I look forward to keeping in touch with all the good work that will be produced by this network in the future.

Jeff Young, Bouverie (Editor)
Looking out the window at our green landscapes, it would be easy to assume that this area was not very affected at all by drought and that once our rainfall picks up the drought effects will disappear. However, this isn’t so and the ‘recovery’ process after drought can be a long road for many farmers, depending on debt levels and how quickly the land is able to recover.

The Farmers and Community Connect Project aims to provide increased awareness within our community that some of our local farmers have been significantly affected by the drought and that the recovery process continues for many of them.

As a small way of acknowledging these challenges within our farming communities, children from the Bona Vista Primary School created artwork with help from local artists and developed ‘self care’ messages which are to be included in the 2009 Farmers and Community Connect Project Calendar. The calendar, supported by local community service providers and businesses, will be available in December 2008.

Lauren Gordon
West Gippsland Healthcare Group
phone 5624 3500
email lauren.gordon@wghg.com.au

CAPE CONRAN GETAWAY WEEKEND
for drought affected farming families

This weekend was organised by Diane Robinson with much help from other members of the Gippsland CIG.

Thanks to all those who helped in any way, including the many funding sources, as without this support the weekend could not have taken place. The goal of the camp was to give families the opportunity, at no cost, to escape the stresses they face on their farms and to put them in a supported environment where they could relax and gain skills to improve their emotional and social wellbeing.

There were 80 participants, ranging in age from 5 months to 75 years, consisting of singles, couples, single parent families, and families of 3 generations. Participants came from all over Gippsland and two families from the Cobram area of NE Victoria.

On the first night (Friday evening) each family was asked to take a quilt square and to produce a picture of ‘your journey to here’ over the weekend. This could be their journey to the weekend, or the journey through life to this point. It was wonderful to see the individuals and families working on these squares and at the same time being able to ‘tell their story’. The participants had each come along carrying their own burdens and by sharing these they were able to support and ‘share the load’. As one person, who had come along after having chemo said ‘my load is small compared to theirs’.

Apart from the long term exposure to drought, some of the participants had also experienced multiple bushfires and floods in the past couple of years, pushing their resilience to the limits. The idea was to introduce the children to ideas and values that they had not experienced, and to give them the opportunity to be able to ‘think out of the box’, (flexibility being a key component of RESILIENCE). An unintended benefit, as this was also ‘reconciliation week’, was to identify two Koorie Children in the group and give them and their parents the opportunity to reconnect with the Koorie Community.

On Saturday morning childcare was provided so that adult participants could attend workshops and activities without having to worry about the care of children. The older group of children were supervised by Koorie leaders who shared cultural knowledge. The idea was to introduce the children to ideas and values that they had not experienced, and to give them the opportunity to be able to ‘think out of the box’, (flexibility being a key component of RESILIENCE). An unintended benefit, as this was also ‘reconciliation week’, was to identify two Koorie Children in the group and give them and their parents the opportunity to reconnect with the Koorie Community.

The Farmers and Community Connect Project

Lauren Gordon
West Gippsland Healthcare Group
phone 5624 3500
email lauren.gordon@wghg.com.au
Two Photographic Projects Depict Drought

Previous editions of No Bull have promoted two photographic projects endeavouring to convey the impact of drought in Australia. The first is a travelling photographic exhibition called, No Bull: A Day in the Life of Rural Victoria, available for loan from the VicRelief Foodbank. The Bouwerie Centre borrowed this evocative exhibition for the official opening of our new building in July and its 36 framed images are a treasure. The exhibition is also available on CD. Further information: contact Richard Watts, Business Development and Communications Manager on 03 9362 8300.

The second, called Beyond Reasonable Drought, is the product of the Many Australian Photographers group, a non-profit association of 80 emerging and well known photographers, who travelled Australia to capture the impact of the ten-year drought on the psyche of the Nation. An example is shown below, for more, visit: www.beyondreasonabledrought.noelb.com/information.html

Scope of the Research
The Bouwerie Centre conducted the research between December 2006 – September 2008

A co-operative inquiry method, a form of action research, was used to engage drought counsellors and other community members in exploring strategies for engaging and supporting drought affected communities. Drought counsellors were formed into five regional and one central (Bouverie Outreach Line) Co-operative Inquiry Group Action Research (CIGAR) groups that met monthly to provide professional support and to record the growing wisdoms of drought counselling work. Each CIG was facilitated by a co-researcher from the Bouwerie Centre. The Bouwerie CIG facilitators also debriefed together, exploring similarities / differences, themes and issues across the regional CIGs at a Co-operative Inquiry Group Action Research (CIGAR) meeting at Bouwerie, and relating significant themes back to the local CIGs to explore in greater detail. Hence the CIG network acted as a simple, but elegant environment for capturing the growing wisdoms of drought counselling work. Each CIG was facilitated by a co-researcher from the Bouwerie Centre.

The Bouwerie CIG facilitators also debriefed together, exploring similarities / differences, themes and issues across the regional CIGs at a Co-operative Inquiry Group Action Research (CIGAR) meeting at Bouwerie, and relating significant themes back to the local CIGs to explore in greater detail. Hence the CIG network acted as a simple, but elegant environment for capturing the growing wisdoms of drought counselling work. Each CIG was facilitated by a co-researcher from the Bouwerie Centre.

Two state-wide projects emerged from the research
(See pages 14 and 15)
How is drought perceived in Australia?

Reviewing newspaper articles, political speeches and popular literature, West and Smith from the Department of Anthropology and Sociology at the University of Queensland have written a thought provoking paper arguing that although drought is most commonly described as a “deviant, freak of nature that threatens the community,” one in three of the past 130 years have been drought years (West, 1996, page 94). Given the frequency of drought in Australia, it is surprising that there is not more cumulative documentation and co-ordinated planning for drought prevention, support and recovery. This research project, facilitated by The Bouverie Centre, hopes in a small way to contribute to the debate about how best to respond to the emotional and social impact of drought on individuals, families and communities, by documenting the front-line experience of Victoria’s drought counsellors.

The complex nature of drought

The impact of drought affects people differently, even in the same area. Unlike fire and flood, it is not obvious when a drought begins or when it ends. As a drought counsellor participating in the research pointed out, “each person is affected at different times” and so drought can lead to individualisation, isolation and a significant fracturing of community.

It is not obvious when a community is in recovery mode. As pointed out by Rickards (2007) in a report based on 60 in-depth interviews with random farming families in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee, Victoria, “Not only is the onset of drought gradual, but so is recovery from it” (page 16). This has serious consequences at all levels. For example, at a personal level, people might not realise when they are affected by drought because of its intangible insidious onset. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by other more acute natural disasters are not as readily available to people suffering drought. The actual financial impact directly attributed to drought, is also difficult to assess because of its pervasive nature.

The chronic nature of drought

Drought is by nature chronic and long term. Sartore and her colleagues argue that “because of the degree of environmental change wrought, drought may be viewed as a chronic natural disaster, especially as it affects entire communities.” (Sartore, 2005, page 316). The consequences of drought, as the drought itself, are long term. It usually takes at least 2-3 seasons for farmers to catch up financially after a drought, but loss of bloodlines built up over generations, for example, may never be fully replaced (Johnston, 2003).

The emotional and social impacts over the different stages of drought are not well understood. In all disasters, people need to address pressing safety and practical problems first. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by other more acute natural disasters are not as readily available to people suffering drought. The actual financial impact directly attributed to drought, is also difficult to assess because of its pervasive nature.

The emotional and social impacts over the different stages of drought are not well understood. In all disasters, people need to address pressing safety and practical problems first. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by other more acute natural disasters are not as readily available to people suffering drought. The actual financial impact directly attributed to drought, is also difficult to assess because of its pervasive nature.

Although drought is chronic, funding for drought counsellors tends to be short term. This stop-start funding (DHS drought forum 16-3-07 complaint from the floor) is a major limitation to the development of effective drought counselling services over time. Financial constraints obviously need to be considered, but drought counselling evaluations repeatedly call for drought counselling to be considered within a long term planning framework (eg. Johnston, Sartore, 2005).

If drought was perceived as an expected part of Australian life rather than as a capricious freak of nature (West, 1996, Sartore, 2005), would drought support follow a ‘stop-start-stop-start’ funding pattern? Would the wisdoms from previous drought counselling services be lost? Would a drought response plan be ongoing? Would drought be part of an integrated response to the range of stresses affecting rural Australia?

Stop-start funding does not allow services to establish a reputation that they are ‘in for the long haul’ or to establish robust networks that lead to co-ordinated services. Rural communities suspicious of counselling are less likely to trust or invest in services that are likely to be ‘here today and gone tomorrow’.

How can we best help people in response to other long term conditions?

The complex nature of drought

The impact of drought affects people differently, even in the same area. Unlike fire and flood, it is not obvious when a drought begins or when it ends. As a drought counsellor participating in the research pointed out, “each person is affected at different times” and so drought can lead to individualisation, isolation and a significant fracturing of community.

It is not obvious when a community is in recovery mode. As pointed out by Rickards (2007) in a report based on 60 in-depth interviews with random farming families in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee, Victoria, “Not only is the onset of drought gradual, but so is recovery from it” (page 16). This has serious consequences at all levels. For example, at a personal level, people might not realise when they are affected by drought because of its intangible insidious onset. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by other more acute natural disasters are not as readily available to people suffering drought. The actual financial impact directly attributed to drought, is also difficult to assess because of its pervasive nature.

The chronic nature of drought

Drought is by nature chronic and long term. Sartore and her colleagues argue that “because of the degree of environmental change wrought, drought may be viewed as a chronic natural disaster, especially as it affects entire communities.” (Sartore, 2005, page 316). The consequences of drought, as the drought itself, are long term. It usually takes at least 2-3 seasons for farmers to catch up financially after a drought, but loss of bloodlines built up over generations, for example, may never be fully replaced (Johnston, 2003).

The emotional and social impacts over the different stages of drought are not well understood. In all disasters, people need to address pressing safety and practical problems first. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by other more acute natural disasters are not as readily available to people suffering drought. The actual financial impact directly attributed to drought, is also difficult to assess because of its pervasive nature.

Although drought is chronic, funding for drought counsellors tends to be short term. This stop-start funding (DHS drought forum 16-3-07 complaint from the floor) is a major limitation to the development of effective drought counselling services over time. Financial constraints obviously need to be considered, but drought counselling evaluations repeatedly call for drought counselling to be considered within a long term planning framework (eg. Johnston, Sartore, 2005).

If drought was perceived as an expected part of Australian life rather than as a capricious freak of nature (West, 1996, Sartore, 2005), would drought support follow a ‘stop-start-stop-start’ funding pattern? Would the wisdoms from previous drought counselling services be lost? Would a drought response plan be ongoing? Would drought be part of an integrated response to the range of stresses affecting rural Australia?

Stop-start funding does not allow services to establish a reputation that they are ‘in for the long haul’ or to establish robust networks that lead to co-ordinated services. Rural communities suspicious of counselling are less likely to trust or invest in services that are likely to be ‘here today and gone tomorrow’.

How can we best help people in response to other long term conditions?

The complex nature of drought

The impact of drought affects people differently, even in the same area. Unlike fire and flood, it is not obvious when a drought begins or when it ends. As a drought counsellor participating in the research pointed out, “each person is affected at different times” and so drought can lead to individualisation, isolation and a significant fracturing of community.

It is not obvious when a community is in recovery mode. As pointed out by Rickards (2007) in a report based on 60 in-depth interviews with random farming families in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee, Victoria, “Not only is the onset of drought gradual, but so is recovery from it” (page 16). This has serious consequences at all levels. For example, at a personal level, people might not realise when they are affected by drought because of its intangible insidious onset. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by other more acute natural disasters are not as readily available to people suffering drought. The actual financial impact directly attributed to drought, is also difficult to assess because of its pervasive nature.

The chronic nature of drought

Drought is by nature chronic and long term. Sartore and her colleagues argue that “because of the degree of environmental change wrought, drought may be viewed as a chronic natural disaster, especially as it affects entire communities.” (Sartore, 2005, page 316). The consequences of drought, as the drought itself, are long term. It usually takes at least 2-3 seasons for farmers to catch up financially after a drought, but loss of bloodlines built up over generations, for example, may never be fully replaced (Johnston, 2003).

The emotional and social impacts over the different stages of drought are not well understood. In all disasters, people need to address pressing safety and practical problems in the early stages and only begin to become aware of the need for psychological assistance down the track, often when the immediate threat has passed. People affected by drought are probably no different, except it is less clear when the main threat begins and when it has passed. Does this set up a context for people to experience a vague but ever present chronic stress, as people experience in response to other long term conditions?
Apart from services needing time to get established, there is also a time lag between rains and recovery from drought at a farming and local community level. In fact for farmers, rain brings with it additional costs needed to take advantage of the rains (Rickards, 2007), such as buying stock, sowing new crops etc. A number of post-project evaluations and drought research projects point out that the full emotional impact of drought only occurs after the most intense period of the drought, just as funding and the wider community is moving onto the next acute crisis. In other words, people often only ‘drop their bundle when they can’ (Young, 2007). The Relationships Australia drought counselling evaluation pointed out that it is only “after rain, (that) other issues such as depression and relationship breakdown come to the fore.” (Johnston, 2003, page 13). The second report of the Birch Chip Grouping’s research (released in July 2008), which describes in-depth follow-up interviews with some of the 60 farming families who were part of the group’s original research, found a greater focus and acknowledgement of emotional issues further down the track. The current study explores this contradiction: that designated drought counselling services are often cut just at the time when people affected by drought are most likely to seek or need counselling support.

The issues faced by drought counselling are common to many rural health initiatives and hence the next section looks at the broader context of help seeking behaviours in rural communities. It is hoped that the current drought project report, in a small way, help inform the provision of rural health services more generally.

Stress, suicide and seeking help in rural communities

The task of providing social and emotional support to people affected by the drought is not an easy one - because providing social and emotional support to people in general is not easy. The ‘Burden of Disease and Injury in Australia’ study found that across urban and rural Australia, mental health problems are the leading cause of years lost due to disability, accounting for nearly 30% of the non-fatals burden of disease (Mathers, Vos & Stevenson, 1999). And yet only one-third of people with mental health problems access health services (Wainer, 2000). Several studies point out that whilst the level of mental health difficulties experienced by rural people is similar to urban folks, rural people are less likely to seek help. A recent report written by the Centre for Rural Mental Health (November 2005) suggests that apart from a culture of self-reliance, rural people are reluctant to access counselling services for three broad reasons: 1) a preference to seek help from family and friends; 2) the stigma around mental health problems; and 3) limited knowledge and availability of services.

Non help seeking does not equate with an absence of problems. Whilst rural men are least likely to seek help, the leading cause of death for young men in rural Australia is suicide, (reported in Wainer, 2000). Sartore and her colleagues from the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health in New South Wales argue that even without the impact of drought, Australian farmers commit suicide at higher rates than the national average and for comparable rural populations around the world (Sartore, 2005). A study by Caldwell et al (2004) indicates that although metropolitan and rural men aged 18–29 have similar rates of mental illness, rural (45.4 per 100,000) and remote (51.7 per 100,000) men in this age range are more likely to commit suicide than their metropolitan counterparts (31.8 per 100,000) and less likely to seek help (11.4 vs 25.2 per 100,000). Caldwell et al’s paper calls for research into “why young men in non metropolitan areas...do not engage with mental health services” (page 10). Furthermore, men are less likely to seek help for suicidal ideation than for other personal-emotional problems (Carlton & Deane, 2000, cited in Cusack, 2004).

The relationship between drought and suicide is difficult to measure because the insidious and chronic impact of drought means it is hard to determine what is and equally what is, not, linked to drought; although common sense would suggest that an ill-defined, chronic disaster with major economic, social and psychological impacts would exacerbate potential suicides. It also makes sense that help seeking is related to availability and accessibility of services. For example, access to mental health services is more difficult for people living in remote rural areas given “there are fewer psychiatrists (by main place of work) for rural and remote populations (3.3 and 1.8 per 100 000 respectively) than for metropolitan populations (14.2 per 100,000)” (Caldwell, 2004, page 10). In the absence of formal mental health services, community resilience building strategies, including providing training and support to the informal help support roles played by lay people, could potentially play a significant role in early intervention and helping prevent rural suicide.
what are the developmental stages of drought counselling services?

If I was to provide a simple account of the broad developmental stages of drought counselling, based on this study, the stages would reflect both the developmental responses to the drought and the developmental stages of a new drought counselling service. The first 6 months of the drought counsellors’ lives was dominated by finding creative ways to seek people to counsel, using networking and community development inspired strategies. When drought counsellors did engage clients, requests for practical supports and financial help were common because people were in the early and immediate stages of being affected by the drought.

Over the next 6 months, CIG groups reported growing numbers of clients and people presenting with concerns broader than drought, including previous trauma due to other natural disasters and crises; relationship issues; and business relationship issues such as financial arrangements with off-farm siblings that had been put to one side at the height of the drought. In response to these themes, I was reminded of a line I often use in counselling to explain why people often find themselves more emotional just as things begin to improve, “people drop their bundle when they can”, which resonated with drought counsellors and their clients.

Towards the end of the first twelve months of practice, several counsellors (Hume counsellors presentation at the Shepparton NB T workshop 10/4/08 and Gippsland CIG #12 9/5/08) began noticing that whilst farmers in the early stages asked, “What money can you give me?” (also asked with humorous cynicism “What are you going to tell us you can’t give us?”) farmers were now starting to accept the need to change their business practices and wanted support in the change process.

The next stage is likely to be dominated by state funded drought counsellors’ preparing for their contracts to end as the number of clients wanting to address the emotional impacts of the drought grows, in a context of fading interest and concern from the wider community, as some rain falls and the community experience compassion fatigue in the face of a long-term crisis. Once feelings of helplessness and isolation are acknowledged, drought counselled could constructively termed this difficult phase, the ‘legacy’ phase. Supported by The Bouverie team, drought counsellors were invited to consider what they wanted to pass onto others and how they could record and document their practice wisdom for future drought workers. I suspect without the CIG – OGAR support network, this phase would have been characterised by a gradual drifting off to other jobs, an accompanying decline in morale and a dramatic loss of practice wisdom.

This next stage is about new beginnings. Many state funded drought counsellors have found new jobs that either allow them to continue doing similar work or allow them to use the practice wisdom developed over the past 18 months to inform their new roles. The federal funded drought workers will continue into next year and have benefited from being involved with the CIGs. This and other methods of transferring practice wisdom and specialist drought counselling knowledge is the task currently facing drought counsellors—a legacy of which they should be very proud.

Somewhat that The Bouverie Centre is proud of is the fact that the drought specific workers have decided to continue the CIG networks in each region, co-ordinating and managing the CIG networks themselves. The Bouverie Centre is keen to bring the CIGs together in about 6-8 months time to facilitate the direct sharing of practice wisdom. These structures will provide specific support around drought in a more sustainable way.

Jeff Young, The Bouverie Centre j.young@latrobe.edu.au

Drawing on their experience of providing support to over 1000 distressed callers from a range of rural communities acutely affected by drought, Hall and Scheltens suggest that a perception by rural people that they can’t change things by talking may reflect a general feeling of disempowerment. I wonder though if it is part of a pragmatic culture where rural people are more likely to address practical issues first, then, consider more psychological and emotional issues, only when the practical solutions succeed or fail. This was certainly the early experience of both the telephone and face-to-face drought counsellors, who found that requests for practical support were often followed by counselling, which in turn complemented the practical assistance.

What’s the point of talking, talking won’t change anything” is a common refrain in rural communities when counselling is raised. Hall and Scheltens suggest that a perception by rural people that they can’t change things by talking may reflect a general feeling of disempowerment. I wonder though if it is part of a pragmatic culture where rural people are more likely to address practical issues first, then, consider more psychological and emotional issues, only when the practical solutions succeed or fail. This was certainly the early experience of both the telephone and face-to-face drought counsellors, who found that requests for practical support were often followed by counselling, which in turn complemented the practical assistance.

Drawing on their experience of providing support to over 1000 distressed callers from a range of rural communities acutely affected by drought, Hall and Scheltens argue that conceptualising rural communities as suffering chronic disadvantage is more apt and that the impact of drought is only one part of a more complex picture of rural crisis. A number of drought counselling evaluations (Anonymous, 2006, Johnston, 2003, Sartore, 2005) call for support to be ongoing and focused on drought as part of larger changes affecting rural communities. The literature chronicling rural disadvantage and change in Australia is touched on in the following sections.

Rural disadvantage

Hall and Scheltens list the following pre-existing issues affecting rural Australia as underlying the impact of drought: “disruption to family and community in ‘aging’ rural communities; ongoing financial strain faced by many rural people which is not necessarily linked to the drought; confusion and frustration by rural families linked to a repositioning of gender roles, particularly where there are strong ‘traditional’ family values; and social isolation, which can contribute to helplessness and domestic violence” (Hall, 2005, page 349). The authors present a range of case studies of callers who are struggling with these underlying issues, exacerbated by drought, to make their point. The complexity of viewing the impacts of drought in the context of dramatic and ongoing changes to rural life can feel overwhelming, but if drought response is to hear the call for long term planning, it will need to take into account the broader rural context. The following section briefly reports on some of the changes affecting rural Australia, thus providing a broader context for the current project.

Rural Australia is changing

Is rural Australia undergoing a radical change like the industrial revolution (Lesley Gippsland CIG, the great depression (Judy Gipsland CIG) or the changes to manufacturing in Victoria in the 80’s (Jeff CIG facilitator)?

Emily Phillips, Sociologist and Senior Policy Advisor from the Department of Primary Industries (DPI), points out that the aging of rural populations due to population loss to larger regional centres, especially among the young, is a key factor affecting rural communities. She explains that increases in farm size have resulted in fewer farmers to contribute to the community infrastructure (Phillips, 2007). In a presentation to a DHS Strategic Drought Planning Workshop, on the 24th May 2008, she stated that the number of farms in Victoria has almost halved since 1970 and that 10% of farms produce 40 - 50% of agricultural production. Furthermore, 50% of farms produce just over 10% of agricultural production and increasingly rely on off-farm income (Phillips, 2007).

Professor Margaret Alston, director of the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University, argues that globalisation and agricultural changes have resulted in major changes to inland Australia, including the drift of young people from country towns to cities and from inland to coastal regions and regional ‘sponge’ cities [cities that soak up population from surrounding rural areas] (Alston, 2004). Alston cites Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) figures for the 12 month period prior to June 2000 that show of the 270 shires that lost population, most were rural, with those dependent on broad acre farming most likely to lose population. As Phillips points out, the loss of population is more striking among young people. Based on analysis of ABS data, in-depth interviews and focus groups with key informants as well as her own surveys of young people and their parents, Alston (2004) concludes that, “the loss of young people, and the greater loss of young women, is driven by a lack of employment options, the need to access tertiary education, it is also by a need to escape the small town milieu.” (Alston, 2004, page 300)
New to the role but not to the issues - thanks to the support of the CIG network

(On this thoughtful and reflective piece, newly appointed Emma Mahony talks about discovering what is needed in her two roles, one as a Rural Community Support Worker and the other as The Drought Recovery Support Coordinator. Editor)

Role one: Rural Community Support
It is very early days in this role and I am still discovering and developing an understanding of this unique project and the broader drought initiative. The Otway Division project will work in and around the Hamilton area looking at how to identify farmers with mental health struggles and then looking to the follow up process. A focus of the project is broader community based mental health education, along with facilitating getting farmers along to their GP. From here supporting/resourcing GPs in identifying farmers with mental health struggles and the referral and network process beyond this step. In discovering the drought community I have been inspired by the commitment and creativity of all, from the resilience and determination of the farming community, to drought counsellors finding ways to engage and develop connections to the network of services and supports, and working together to develop sustainable networks and resources.

The learning thus far have been many, learning about the unique experiences of the farming community, with their long history of ‘struggling and succeeding’ over great resilience and common tendency to not seek help or support. I have learnt about the breadth of services and supports around this community that are working to adapt and support farmers and rural communities through environmental, financial and social change. Learning about their resilience and the way they have adapted and evolved with the land and with the changes in environment, culture and family. Valuing and respecting this capacity to change while acknowledging there are some who may need support, is the balance and in truth some of the greatest challenges of working in this area.

Role two: Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities Initiative
The Drought Recovery Support Coordinator role has evolved into the Rural Community Support Worker role, more in line with similar projects across the state and more communities that are able to take care of their own and their friends, partners, families and neighbours mental health, across the many seasons and changes ahead. The evolution of the title for this position reflects the changing and adapting necessary for all working with farmers and farming families, both those working on the land directly, and those connected to these communities.

Stepping into this role three months ago, I have learnt a great deal and discovered a breadth of services working creatively to engage and resource a community who tend to be a little reluctant to step forward, a bit hesitant to seek help. Particular congratulations go to the Drought Counselling community who have found ways to meet and build relationships with a great many living on the land, and those connected to them - no mean feat! So in short, keeping to my paragraph or two, here is the great work undertaken by all thus far, may this provide a great foundation, a great network and a breadth of resources for the farming community as they move through this period of drought recovery and into the challenges and opportunities ahead.

Emma Mahony
Rural Community Support Worker
Otway Division of General Practice, Warrnambool
0419 897 124
emahony@otway.asn.au

The loss of young people, including the resulting gender imbalance, contributes to a loss in social capital. Social capital is the human glue that holds a community together - the participation, trust, reciprocity, networks etc. Lower social capital means fewer sporting clubs and other community groups and organisations. In times of drought, social capital is eroded and can become fragmented and lost. Needed. The chronic nature of drought, combined with the resulting prolonged economic stress, erodes engagement in activities outside of the bare essentials. The revitalisation of social capital is likely to be a key factor in helping communities manage the impact of drought. Alston found that in the 8 Local Government Authorities (LGAs) she studied “the resident that social capital is an important and fragile condition of a rural community’s capacity to survive” (Alston, 2004, page 310).

Phillips (2007) points out rural communities are in transition, facing rapid social, economic and demographic change. She argues that their survival will depend on continued migration of new residents and the existing communities’ ability to maintain social cohesion with absorbing the new members. For example, the ability to absorb retirees from inner-city migrants, who may have different cultural values to the existing mainstream in small rural towns, may be the key to renewal for many rural areas. This ability Phillips calls ‘bridging’ social capital, the ability to create a bridge between the old and the new. She points out that rural communities tend to score higher on ‘bonding’ social capital that is, the internal networks, the ability to get help from friends, family and neighbours when needed but lower on ‘bridging’ social capital. Phillips argues that, “Too much bonding and not enough bridging capital restricts capacity to respond to change” (Phillips, 2007, slide 9).

However, the rate of change also has a significant impact on a community’s ability to cope. Phillips points to a “general rule of thumb that most rural communities can cope with less than 3 percent fall in farm numbers per annum” (Phillips, 2007, slide 6). Drought obviously affects the rate of change and hence the adjustment response. The average fall in farm numbers in the 10 years prior to 1996 was 1.31%, but according to Phillips, the DPI predicts exit rates due to the current drought will be even higher than previous droughts, perhaps temporarily as high as 9% per annum in some production/transition landscapes, due to a combination of factors including global competition, unregulated markets, water trading and the high demand for water and land. Rapid change, such as this would lead to significant pressures on employment and social cohesion making the response to drought more difficult.

High disadvantage such as lack of employment options, isolation, lack of internet facilities, combined with low social capital, especially low levels of ‘bridging’ social capital, significantly impacts on the ability of communities to respond well to change. Phillips argues that ‘bonding’ may therefore require rethinking these community elements in addition to effective drought counselling. It may be necessary to provide drought counselling in ways that address the elements of disadvantage and promoting ‘bridging’ as well as ‘bonding’ social capital. In other words, developing models of service delivery that integrate counselling and community development approaches may be necessary and hence the relationship between these two approaches is explored in the current study.

What Facilitates Access and Utilization of Mental Health Services for Rural People?
The smaller and the more remote a community is, the greater the role that ‘Word of Mouth’ seems to play (Bloydell, 2006) - both in terms of information about what is available, but also in terms of endorsement. The latter is presumably even more significant where community members are less familiar or out of sight sceptical about the service, such as mental health or counselling. A participant in Bloydell’s research reported that, “word of mouth is like wildfire. It’s the number one thing, it’s word of mouth. Word of mouth is valuable, invaluable. Indispensable” (page 184).

In her in-depth interviews of 30 parents, mostly mothers of children receiving mental health services in rural Ontario, Canada, Bloydell and her colleagues (2006) found that flexible friendly services where workers were reported as ‘going above and beyond the call of duty’ helped overcome some of the constraints to seeking help such as stigma associated with mental health services, as did providing home visits, which allowed clients to be seen in their familiar environment. In addition to providing local services, which allowed for less disruption to family life, and less travel expenses, Boydell and her colleagues found that hiring local people for local services was “more culturally acceptable [to clients] and retention rates tend to be higher [for professionals]” (page 186). Access and utilisation of health services is therefore inextricably related to local community; its geography, economics and culture. Therefore in the next section I briefly summarise dimensions of the community development literature relevant to the drought support project.

Community Development
Community development, because of its broad focus and process oriented, dynamic nature, can be difficult to define. As the name suggests, the basic aim of community development is to improve the capacity of a whole community to manage change, survive adversity and enjoy well-being. Community development has a strong philosophical base, hence this brief summary is likely to offend informed readers. Rather than merely providing help to a community, community development also works toward creating the conditions and resources for the community to help itself in an empowering and sustainable way.

Capacity building and increasing social capital are terms used to capture the idea of promoting a stronger functioning community. These terms convey the interconnectedness of social and economic health. The processes associated with rural community development involves stakeholders where the community is at, both in development, engaging and valuing local resources, including local people, produce and networks, maximising local participation, balancing the ‘process of doing’ with ‘the doing’ so that outcomes are sustainable and transferable to other challenges (Poll, J. No Bull, February 2008, page 14).

Jeff Young, Bouverie
Contact Carmel Hobbs (ehobbs@latrobe.edu.au) for more rural / drought references
Finding from the Research

How to engage rural people who are reluctant to seek help

Drought counselling is different from traditional forms of centre-based counselling. It has components in common with other outreach models and approaches which have been developed for engaging hard-to-reach clients and responding to third party concerns. Cold calling, outreach, community development and counselling all appear to be key components of a comprehensive and effective drought counselling model. Some of the associated skills documented by the research follow.

COMBINING PRACTICAL SUPPORT WITH EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

Whatever it takes (WIT)

Traditionally trained counsellors found themselves having to work outside their comfort zone to engage the target population. This meant cold calling and working with different groups outside the health area (eg rural financial counsellors, truck drivers, vets, etc). Many drought counsellors described ‘pitching in’ to help with practical tasks around the farm or businesses, such as baling hay, milking cows, helping deliver calves, etc to build a connection which sometimes led to counselling.

Do, don’t just talk

Rural people value reliability. ‘Doing’ is embodying an idea. Do, don’t just talk about their concerns with the person; seeing the referrer as a client too and providing support for them to help the person; cold calling a whole area where people were identified as struggling; warm calling (see below).

Discretionary funds and practical supports

Many farmers and associated business people “won’t pick up the phone until they are down to their last dollar or last drop of water and then want practical help straight away” (CIGAR). Cold calling counsellors reported that people they helped had very specific requests and small amounts of funds sometimes led to gains larger than the amount provided. For example, Jim had a million dollar debt but was most stressed about not being able to afford a calculator for his school aged kids. It is important that funds be available with little formal assessment and red tape, so that the drought counsellor can be responsive and shame minimised.

INFORMED WORKERS

Insiders vs outsiders

Although debate about whether you had to be an insider or not remains unresolved, with advantages to both, there was agreement that drought counsellors needed to gain some knowledge of farming and farming culture (Grampians CIG). This did not mean necessarily being a farmer themselves but finding ways to educate themselves about farming and the issues faced by farmers. The Bowerbird Effect

Besides the obvious (research and reading of local papers) a practical approach by non-farming drought counsellors can use to educate themselves about farming issues is called ‘Snowballing or the Bowerbird effect’ by one drought counsellor. She describes picking up the information she picks up from each farm visit as forming “the basis of chat for my next visit; to be repeated many times along the road, with any other bits that either make me look and sound knowledgeable or well resourced, or is of practical use for the farmer visited.”

ACTIVE OUTREACH

Assertive and third party referrals

A common dilemma experienced by the drought counsellors and the Rural Support Line counsellors is when a person calls, worried about someone else (third party referrals). A drought counsellor from Loddon-Mallee reported getting “a lot of phone calls from people worried about someone else. We give advice over the phone, but also offer a direct consultation to the person calling.” A typical example was, “Can you check up on Joe because I think he is struggling, but don’t tell him I told you.” Another common request was from women asking, “How can I support my husband, he won’t seek help?” (Drought counsellor, presenting during NBT Workshop Stawell, 2007).

Drought counsellors developed a range of strategies for assertively raising concerns without compromising ethical practice, including: coaching the referrer to be more upfront about their concerns with the person; seeing the referrer as a client too and providing support for them to help the person; cold calling a whole area where people were identified as struggling; warm calling (see below).

Cold calling

Cold calling is the practice of calling on all farms in a designated area to offer information, support and referral if requested. Cold calling is an engagement strategy and not a counselling approach, although a cold call may lead to a referral for counselling.

Cold calling is a controversial approach, especially for traditionally trained counsellors who worry about the approach being experienced as intrusive by those visited. Concerns of farmers being singled out as needing help are addressed by the drought counsellor on every farm in a designated area. Some drought counsellors advertise the area and time-table of cold calling in local newspapers - to help prepare the recipients for the calls. Initial fears that farmers would act angrily to unsolicited calls did not prove accurate (No Bull, October 2007, page 8, No Bull, February 2008, page 11).

Some host agencies, especially hospitals, do not support cold calling because of risk management policies or the perceived risks to health and safety of workers - this was addressed by people working in pairs or ringing into the office before and after visits.

The Gippsland CIG reflect on natural disasters

Disaster Fatigue

Fatigue is mental or physical exhaustion that stops a person from being able to function normally. It disrupts the circadian rhythms or internal body clock, the body’s natural rhythms which are repeated approximately every 24 hours and which affect body temperature, digestion, hormone levels, sleeping patterns and other functions of the body.

Whilst it is normal to become tired through physical and mental effort, fatigue is also caused by prolonged periods of physical and/or mental exertion during drought, fire and flood disasters, as has happened across many communities in Gippsland, without enough time to recover.

Mid to Long Term Responses to a Disaster (months to years)

Dr. Rob Gordon, Clinical Psychologist, consultant to the State Emergency Recovery Unit of the Victorian Department of Human Services, points out that some effects of disaster only become obvious after a year or longer. Some of the effects of living under stress for long periods include: economic hardship, poor health, relationship problems with children’s development or behaviour, depression, loss of leisure and recreation, loss of friendship networks, loss of sense of direction in life and continuing disturbing memories of the disaster.

Business and Community working together in times of Drought

A local independent supermarket in South Gippsland established a drought relief fund, by donating a few cents off selected items to drought relief. This was then distributed to a range of local emergency relief providers to distribute as required. One personer on finding out where the funds had come from was delighted. She said, “Whenever I had a couple of dollars to spare I gave it to the drought relief.”

A good example of what goes around comes around.

Local Initiative works well

A free entertainment night, called “You can’t die laughing” was held for rural families in Leongatha and over 300 people attended. This was a local initiative organised by the South Gippsland branch of the Australian Veterinary Association, South Gippsland Shire Council and Landcare, with catering by the Country Women’s Association. There have been a number of enquiries from other rural towns based on the write up of this initiative in No Bull, asking for details and hoping to organise a similar event.

Social Impact of Drought Forum

CIG members have contributed feedback and real life examples to Tamworth McGhee who is presenting them to the forum.
Men’s health remains an important priority and this is reflected in social work.

A Rural Futures Forum was held at the Shelford Public Hall. This project is an adjustment to climate change.

The Project will deliver information kits containing referral information.

People suffering from mental health difficulties as a result of exposure to drought are a major concern. The intention is to provide a tailored education/training program for Agents, Rural Financial Counsellors) who can act as referral points for mental health issues. The Project, funded by the Drought Support Program, is being implemented across the Barwon South West region.

Larry Neeson, Regional Drought Co-ordinator, BSW Region - DHS

Some 25% of my client base is made up of farmers and many more rely on agriculture for employment: shearing; agronomy; stock agents etc. Over the past 18 months, many farmers’ information nights have been held and farm-gate cold-calling has been instigated through the local drought committee to ensure that all farmers get the information they need. Our counselling service has extended hours of operation to be more farmer-friendly. Every farm in the area has received post-cards from primary school students offering words of support and hope. This may seem an unlikely activity, but as one farmer stated to me in tears - she had not cried just at the time when all seemed hopeless; cows had gone off to market at rock-bottom prices as there was no fodder or water available to keep them longer. The thought of young children taking off was terrifying as there were no alternative markets. The project has been significant in contributing to improving the farmers’ wellbeing at a time of severe crisis, providing them with new hope and in the process generating much on-going goodwill across the organisations involved.

Social work has provided outreach to families, children at risk, women and children who are dealing with situations of family violence, and people who have been involved in fire recovery efforts.

Social work has provided outreach to education and community groups, local government and other public and private sector services.

Evelyn Jack, Western District Health Service, email evelyn.jack@wdhs.net

Over the course of the project, there was a general move towards embracing ‘cold calling’ as an important approach to increasing awareness for otherwise sensitive services (for an example, see No Bull, February 2008, page 11). Cold calling, especially the ‘Farm Gate Model’ became very influential, being piloted in Warrnambool, then extended to the Loddon-Mallee and Barwon South West CIGs. Evaluation of the Campaspe Primary Care Partnership’s farm-gate pathway and farm-gate cold calling strategy, conducted by members of the Loddon-Mallee CIG, found that of the 200 irrigators visited, 30% of farmers found the service helpful and 68% ongoing community health counselling (Campaspe PCP).

Warm calling

A drought counsellor in Gippsland (Gippsland CIG #4, 22/6/07) described an approach she called ‘warm calling’, or ‘semi-cold calling’, when she makes contacts at events, like pub nights, and then says “I’ll call if I am in the area.” She’ll then call on people she is worried about.

Counselling specific to drought

Whilst much of drought counselling is the same as any other counselling (acknowledgement, bearing witness, providing an opportunity to talk, a chance to problem solve or to just reflect), there appear two broad types of specific drought counselling strategies. One is making the most of brief or one-off encounters and the other is being able to chat over a longer period which may or may not gradually move into a counselling type encounter. Both are described below.

Making the most of every encounter

The Grampians CIG emphasised that drought counselling work was often opportunistic and involves taking any chance to chat to community members, “You often only get one chance.” Drought counsellors used single session therapy ideas to make the best of every encounter. Single session therapy is based on accepting the research showing that, (1) the most common number of sessions in most counselling contexts is one; (2) most people are helped in the first session; (3) more than six sessions in one session and (4) not using the time; (3) you can’t tell who will attend only once and who will return - hence single session inspired counselling is responsive to what the client wants and the counsellor creates a context to ‘make the most of every encounter’. The counsellor is likely to be direct and ‘out to the chase’.

Don’t bullshit

No bullshit therapy (NBTh) provided a useful framework for the drought counsellors. “Generally there is a lack of understanding in the community about counselling” Grampians CIG (19-3-07). Counselling is often stereotyped and there needs to be greater clarity about what counselling is. A drought counsellor from Gippsland commented that: “NBTh is useful in de-mystifying the myths surrounding counselling” (CIG #9, 12-12-07). Clients who were suspicious of counselling often describe it as bullshit. Therefore, No Bullshit Therapy acted as a bit of a door opener for those people. As one NBTh counsellor stated: “People run from therapy but if you put No Bullshit in front of therapy - rural people are surprisingly open to trying it.”

The Fundel Approach

If there is a crisis point within the general conversation, this can be linked to its impact on other family members. Even the most independent stoic person is often more open to seeking help for their children, partners or friends. With this in mind, a counsellor from the Rural Support Line uses what I call the ‘funnel approach’ with clients who ring in wanting practical help rather than counselling. She asks a series of questions that start broad and general and gradually become narrower and specific. For example, “How’s the drought affecting the region? What’s been the biggest impact on your neighbours? How’s your farming doing? How is it knocking your family around? What’s the hardest thing your wife has to manage? Sounds like you’re under a lot of financial stress. What have you done that’s helped the most? Is there anything I could do to help you?” (No Bull, October 2007, page 13).

Red flagging: Moving in and out of emotional issues

Another approach complementary to funnelling is ‘moving in and out’ of difficult and emotionally laden issues. During the drought counselling’ presentation at the Shepparton NBTh workshop (10-04-08) the local drought counsellors described touching on emotional issues, ‘flagging them’, so they can be returned to but only after moving to lighter issues. This work is consistent with the concept of ‘emotional regulation’ used in trauma work. Emotions that threaten to overwhelm rather than liberate, only re-inforce a feeling of being out of control, a central experience of the original trauma itself. If difficult issues are flagged, the counsellor can move to chatting mode, and negotiate returning the sensitive topic at a later time.

1 Barry Miller uses the term WIT in his work helping Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) clients back into the community.
Findings from the Research

Approaches to counselling informed by the nature of drought

No Heroes: approaches which recognise that drought is a somewhat disenfranchised disaster

There are no heroes in the face of drought! Emergency workers and the people they help to survive the ravages of fire and flood are described as heroes in the media and in the broader community, and yet drought workers and their clients are not. Drought counsellors, who tackle suicidality and attempt to help people in impossible financial situations, and the families they help who are battling the slow stranglehold of drought, are not typically described as heroes, despite their clearly heroic actions. The community, and hence families, are allowed to think about fire & flood differently from drought - there is less stigma associated with fire and flood and hence more able to seek help more openly. Responses to fire and flood tend to be more social as the whole community joins forces to fight the ‘one-off’ crisis but due to the insidious and ongoing nature of drought, the impact can be more socially isolating. Drought ‘victims’ receive less community support for example, fewer interstate volunteers, fewer donations, and media coverage cannot be sustained. The chronic nature of drought is in large part responsible for these different community responses. Whilst people can witness fire and flood in real time in the media, this is not possible with an insidious and long term condition like drought (CIG Gippsland 22-6-07), Also No Bull, July 2007, Editorial page 1). Trauma theory, points out that acknowledgement and the bearing of witness to the survivor’s pain and loss is a key step in the recovery process. The disenfranchised nature of drought may help clients explain the complexity of dealing with its psychological impacts, as acknowledgement of the pain and loss experienced by people affected by drought is not as obvious nor as forthcoming as it is for fire and flood. Drought counsellors commented that their clients often did not appreciate the significance of the drought impact and that making this link was surprisingly therapeutic (Gippsland CIG 3-8-07).

I experienced the differences in community response to fire, flood and drought first-hand during a visit to a small Victorian town with my CIG group, in which a local member of the community gave a presentation about the impact of recent fires, floods and drought. This person talked differently when discussing the different disasters. With fire and flood there was a much clearer, ‘us against a recognized event’, narrative. He mentioned that whilst waiting for the fire to hit, the town folk responded, “come on we’re ready to fight you.” The resultant social response of sticking together led to a “feeling of privilege to be part of it”, he said. There was immediate talk of recovery, “we’ll be up and running soon” both after the fire and flood, that was absent when talking about the drought.

The major observations I made about how the social impact of drought differs from fire and flood during this visit and in the subsequent CIG discussion (Research diary), are as follows:

- The fire had a tangible, objectified status which allowed people to join together to fight against the external force.
- During the presentation, there were a large number of dramatic photos recording the impacts of the fire and flood but none documenting the impact of drought. Drought is harder to pictorialise which makes it harder to externalise and for people to bear witness (ie acknowledge its impact).
- Politicians visited flood affected areas by helicopter / large numbers of people arrived to fight the fires. Drought is much less likely to lead to substantial external resources being provided.
- Fire and flood lead to extra resources being provided to the local district that had been requested for some time. Drought seems less likely to lead to substantial external resources being provided.
- On the trip into this small town, significant road and bridge works were being completed. This provided a powerful and tangible symbol, both that some disaster had hit the area, but also that the reconstruction process / recovery process was underway. There are less tangible activities to indicate the crisis or the recovery process in regard to drought.
- The local town had also built a temporary bridge the day following the flood taking the bridge out - providing a social, communal, active response to the disaster not readily available for drought.
- A member of our CIG group noted that because people are affected at different times and in different ways during a drought, each person tends to go through the drought individually, rather than as a whole community - as in fire and flood.
- The national media was very interested in the flood, which both got in the way of the practical response (recovery process) but also led to the feeling that the burden was somewhat shared with others (Community member’s presentation).
- The broader community, including urbanites can witness fire and flood in real time on television and newspapers, whereas the chronic nature of drought makes this impossible.
- Drought literally does not gain the same level of local community support as evidenced by the funds donated by the general population to support fire and flood but not drought recovery efforts.

The workshops aimed to reduce some of the pressure people experience when they are not sure what to say or do when they are worried about someone experiencing difficulties due to the drought or other stresses. No Bull Support or NB Support (play on NB as being No Bullying or counselling, not a firey) & providing simple practical steps on how to support others. Community Members are doing this crucial work already - NB Support simply helps them do it better.

Drought counsellors (CIG members) were trained to facilitate NB Support so that participants would have back-up if a counselling referral was required. NB Support also provided drought counsellors with good referral reach into the farming and related businesses that are traditionally difficult to engage. Local facilitators followed up each participant by email or phone after the NB Support session, which helped to build this support-referral relationship between drought counsellors and the local community.

How it developed

The insistence from Alana Brennan and the Loddon Mallee CIG that something happen sooner rather than later, led The Bouwerie team to develop the workshop, read it test with other CIGs and then pilot it in Loddon Mallee region on the 15th November, 2007. From there, modifications were made based on workshop feedback, and the program was rolled out across the state. Established using a collaborative approach, Bouwerie provided support to local initiatives, informed by state-wide knowledge generated via the CIG-CiDA network, whilst drawing on local skills (in this case Ruth Turpin - local drought counsellor co-facilitated the NB Support pilot with Pam Rycroft from the Bouwerie Centre).

What it achieved

The NB Support program was warmly welcomed across the state, with over 300 community members attending over 20 workshops, from backgrounds as diverse as: shire staff, football club members, DPI staff, Goulburn Murray Water staff, St Vincent De Paul volunteers, Police, Vet, businesspeople, older farmers etc. Specific outcomes include:

- NB Support Facilitator Workshop and Workbook developed.
- Four NB Support Facilitator workshops completed (approx 85 drought counsellors trained, from every region across the state).
- 750 NB Support Participant workbooks and kits developed and produced.
- Approve 21 NB Support workshops completed
- Over 320 community members have attended NB Support workshops across the state.

Feedback

Feedback from participants in follow-up phone calls consistently highlighted the importance of the workshop in providing practical support to people in a helpful way, down-to-earth information about stress and grief, local referral contacts and connection with the local drought counsellor who was the facilitator.

Specific comments from participants included:

- “Workshops like this are essential for on the ground outreach workers” – Orbost, April 2008.
- “With the increase in stress generally in community due to drought...why isn’t this session compulsory (for Shire workers?)” – Campaspe Shire, May 2008.
- “I’ve really enjoyed this workshop and believe I have learnt quite a lot” – Wangaratta, June 2008.

The future for NB Support

It is clear that people affected by drought may not seek counselling but do talk to someone. These support people then can get stressed and feel they can’t provide support to their ‘clients’ can lead to more resilient communities, where people are looking after each other. NB Support promotes links between local drought counsellors and people who have contact (and support) members of the target population who won’t seek counselling. Interest in NB Support suggests that the program could be used broadly to support communities facing any difficulties – not just drought. In fact, more recent interest from interstate and subsequent facilitator training of counsellors from Tasmania clearly point the way for this program to have far reaching applicability for both different issues and different regions around Australia.

I would like to acknowledge the thorough and thoughtful work of Judy Poll who has co-ordinated the NB Support program. Judy, who was on secondment to the Bouwerie Centre, will return to her position at EACH, in early September.

Jeff Young

For information about NB Support please contact The Bouwerie Centre on 9385 5100.
State-wide projects that emerged

What it is
Looking Out for Your Neighbours' is a series of community workshops held across Victoria, organised by local VFF branches and conducted by local drought counsellors, with back up from The Bouverie Centre. These workshops have identified helpful pathways to access much needed financial, psychological and other supports. At the same time, they have brought people together to talk about the broader effects of drought on their communities, and to explore ways in which they might come together to begin to counter some of these negative effects. These conversations, some of which have occurred during the sessions and others as people mill around after the workshop, have lead to the establishment or re-establishment of a range of community activities.

Examples of some community activities developed as a result of 'Looking Out for Your Neighbours' workshops:
- A women's gardening group
- A regular men's breakfast
- Getting together to have a yarn and help each other fill out the Centrelink forms
- A community barbeque
- Re-invigorating an older men's social group
- Re-kindling consciousness about staying in touch with the older people in the community

How it developed
The 'Looking Out for Your Neighbours' project was initiated by members of the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) Drought Taskforce and Social Policy Committee in recognition of the high levels of stress and ensuing isolation experienced by many farmers and families affected by drought and other related factors. The Bouverie Centre became involved in the project via Brenda McLachlan of the VFF and promoted and facilitated the collaboration between local VFF members and local drought counsellors.

What it achieved
- Pilot community workshop conducted in Bairnsdale – August 2007
- Project launched by Minister Lisa Neville, Stawell - April 2008
- Resource Kit of workshop materials developed
- Flier developed by VFF
- 26 Individualised train-the-trainer and support consultations to drought counsellors
- 16 Looking out for your Neighbours workshops held with 312 farmers (average 20 participants each)
- A range of community activities established or re-established as a result of the workshops
- A further 17 sessions are already planned through the VFF before the end of October 2008
- A combination of 'Looking Out for Your Neighbours' and 'No Bull Support' workshops have also been held at a range of Community Houses and with other community organisations.

Approaches which recognise that drought invites self blame and shame
Struggling or losing a family farm or business that has been handed down over generations naturally results in feelings of shame, failure and responsibility to previous generations, but if this loss is due to drought, the absence of a tangible external event to blame (such as fire or flood) seems to encourage self-blame. If a farm is destroyed as a result of fire or flood, the owners and the community blame the event not the farmer. If a farm is lost because of drought, people are more likely to blame the farmer for making poor decisions. The ongoing nature of drought can put pressure on close relationships leading to increased family conflict, as family members begin to blame each other – blaming their response to the drought for their difficulties rather than joining forces against the drought itself (26-7-07). Discussion during car trip following a CIGAR).

The National Drought Policy puts the responsibility for managing drought with the farmer, under a personal risk management framework, and whilst it is understandable that, “Farmers should be prepared for drought years, how can you prepare for 10 years of drought in a row, in the context of climate change”? (Farming couple, 30-10-07). This couple reported that when the husband had suffered an accident several years earlier, everyone had supported the family but now everyone in the community is exhausted by 10 years of drought. Community tension and exhaustion had replaced the usual readiness of support. They suggested there was a need to lift the mood of the community (see next section).

Providing help in ways that do not shame is an important skill for drought counsellors. A number of people who contributed to the research pointed out that farmers are a proud race (VFF member, couple in an in depth interview) and hence drought counsellors have to develop ways to provide help without shaming. For example, ‘providing resources on each seat during community forums rather than at a specific resource table, so that people don’t have to ‘out themselves’ (An experienced co-ordinator of drought counselling in 2003); ‘financial grants to whole schools for free excursions, rather than for individual families in financial difficulties’ (same worker); Education rather than counselling can work for some and No Bullshit therapy’s non-judgemental directness can minimise shame for most people.

Approaches which recognise that drought can exhaust and divide a community
The chronic nature of drought and the fact that it affects everyone differently and at different times can add to community fragmentation. Corresponding with the Biichop Cropping Group research, CIG members repeatedly pointed out that the drought’s effects depend on the specific area (one side of road ok the other not), type of farm, stage in life (for example, young dependents or not) stage in career (early investment heavy debts etc). For example, one farm may be affected terribly leading to anger, and the farm across the road may be relatively unaffected inducing guilt (Drought counsellor presentation at the NBT Workshop Stawell, 2007).

The distribution of water, the different uses of water (cautious use vs expansive use), and the different impacts of drought on different regions can lead to community conflict and tension. Given its intangible nature, the impact of drought is highly contested and effects depend on the specific area (one side of road ok the other not), type of farm, stage in life (for example, young dependents or not) stage in career (early investment heavy debts etc). For example, one farm may be affected terribly leading to anger, and the farm across the road may be relatively unaffected inducing guilt (Drought counsellor presentation at the NBT Workshop Stawell, 2007).

Prolonged drought can exhaust a community, as people move into individual survival mode and others experience survivor guilt or develop compassion fatigue over time. One drought counsellor from a small community reported that “people don’t have that time for connection any more…because of that survival stuff…not getting into the ute or on the bike and connecting as much” (Loddon-Mallee CIG, 16-4-07). Erosion of social supports creates further isolation and can eat away at community morale, as inferred by a drought counsellor who pointed out that the local field day and local agricultural show was cancelled for the first time in 10 years due to the drought (Loddon-Mallee CIG, 16-4-07).

An understanding of the nature of drought should inform community development approaches, which in turn provide a context in which counselling plays a role. Exhausted communities may need energisers, such as pamper days to ‘kick start’ community action. Community oriented interventions may need to create a culture of ‘we are all in this together, even though we are affected differently.’ Strategies to promote ‘bridging social capital’ as well as ‘bonding social capital’ are needed to build community resilience as people deal with a disenfranchised chronic, intangible and low status disaster.

Jeff Young (Principal Researcher, The Bouverie Centre. For more strategies, see interim report at www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie)
Recommendations from the
(pattern refer to interim report - available www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie)

1.1.1 Co-ordination at all levels to allow for long-term response
- Co-ordinate federal, state and local funding to provide a responsive and sustainable rural outreach counselling service for drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.
- Co-ordinate funding from Federal Health and Ageing (DoHA) and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), state (Victorian Department of Human Services [DHS]) and local government funding to provide a responsive and sustainable rural outreach counselling service for drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.
- Integrate the knowledge, skills and networks developed by the existing drought counselling providers into the ongoing workforce, with designated workers called Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers who would have a broad role to assist rural communities manage drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.
- Experienced drought counselling providers / researchers to brief government services responsible for other aspects of drought recovery (such as The Department of Primary Industries, [DPI], Emergency Management Branch [EMB] etc) on the specific and particular social and emotional impacts of drought to further promote an integrated response at all levels.

1.1.2 Networking between services
- Promote the formation of recovery/change committees in all Shires to co-ordinate all local services in order to promote an integrated response to drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.

1.1.3 Designated drought / fire / flood / climate change counsellors (rural outreach counsellors / community development workers) needed to develop specialist skills and then transfer these skills to the general workforce
- Rather than fund short term positions, increased support for designated rural outreach counsellors / workers who are part of on-going rural health services to develop and promote effective strategies for engaging hard-to-reach rural populations. These designated positions should also have the role of informing their host agencies about effective outreach strategies.

1.1.4 Professional development, training & support for specific / designated drought counsellors
- Continue the documentation of practice based evidence for rural outreach counselling, through the continuation of the drought counsellors’ newsletter, No Bull. Support for a shared newsletter would help link federally, state and locally funded designated workers to share resources and prevent isolation, hence maximising shared expertise.

1.1.5 Minimise loss of knowledge gained by workers during intermittent natural disasters, especially drought, including resources developed.
- Develop mechanisms to maintain ‘service memory and hard won knowledge’ in response to drought given its episodic and insidious chronic nature.
- Create local / state registers of resources developed and experienced drought counsellors whose expertise can be drawn on during future droughts.
- Provide forums (such as community health counselling regional forums) for experienced drought counsellors to share their practice wisdom with on-going rural counsellors and service managers.

1.1.6 A reliable data collection system that informs the workforce
- Develop a reliable data collection system to record information on rural outreach which feeds back into the service system and practitioners on the ground.

1.1.7 Promote strategies compatible with rural cultures
- Promote research and model development such as Single Session Work and No Bulshit Therapy suitable for rural cultures including models of service delivery that promote and integrate outreach, counselling and community development approaches.
- Conduct advertising campaigns that educate people about the impact of crises, such as drought, on families and normalise the need to talk to others in times of crisis.
- Fund and evaluate No Bull Support, a program which seeks to promote community resilience and strengthen natural supports to help rural communities adapt to change. The niche for No Bull Support is that it is a short (half day) workshop that has wide appeal because it normalises stress in the face of drought and other challenges.

Research

- Fund projects to ‘kick start’ community development initiatives as communities affected by drought become exhausted and fragmented.
- Integrate direct services and local community initiatives, via projects like ‘Looking Out for Your Neighbour’ to promote linkages between farmers and Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers to ‘kick start’ the resilience of communities exhausted by chronic stress in order to build ‘bonding and bridging social capital’.

1.1.8 Raise consciousness of the unique impact of chronic, intermittent disasters at every level of policy and service delivery
- See key findings (next section).

1.1.9 Position statement of the drought counsellors across Victoria
- A position statement below, about future drought counselling services was prepared collectively by 70 drought counsellors and related workers who attended the two-day forum in Bendigo (28th & 29th February 2008), called ‘We Care – No Bull: Celebration, best practice and self-care.’

A sustainable long-term vision is vital to support rural communities as they adapt to social, economic and environmental changes.

The social and emotional support for this work would be facilitated by Rural Outreach & Support Workers, building on the established networks and knowledge gained through the drought work, informed by universal recording systems and supported by co-ordinated information sharing.

A strong and effective service would assist in developing communities’ abilities to address a variety of rural crises (i.e. fire, flood, drought) and support ongoing change, with co-ordinated funding from each level of government, and integration with key services.

To be effective in their work, Rural Outreach and Support Workers would require a repertoire of skills and knowledge, including: assertive outreach capabilities, flexibility and an understanding of the challenges of rural communities. Rural Outreach and Support Workers and their organisations would need to develop effective and innovative ways to combine counselling and community development approaches.

Position statement generated by drought counsellors and health and welfare service representatives in Gippsland
- Two common themes that developed universally across all regions, in keeping with previous drought evaluations, were (1) the need for a sustainable ongoing workforce – rather than a workforce reflecting stop – start funding and (2) that this workforce take responsibility for responding to all stressful disasters and change affecting rural communities. This call is captured most succinctly by a position statement generated during a Gippsland CIG meeting (1/2/2008) attended by 19 professionals including managers, drought counsellors, a DHS drought co-ordinator, rural financial counsellors, relationship counsellors, an agricultural consultant and a PCP representative.

Request to government from the Gippsland Co-operative Inquiry Group drought workers
Demographic, economic and climate change represent a major shift and re-direction in the Australian rural landscape similar to the impact of the Great Depression. Long-term planning, co-ordinated at all levels of government is required to provide social and emotional support to assist individuals, families and communities adapt to these major and cumulative changes.

Local community boards / recovery committees should be established to co-ordinate and advise the response to all stressful disasters and change affecting rural communities. This call is captured most succinctly by a position statement generated during a Gippsland CIG meeting (1/2/2008) attended by 19 professionals including managers, drought counsellors, a DHS drought co-ordinator, rural financial counsellors, relationship counsellors, an agricultural consultant and a PCP representative.

An ongoing workforce, skilled in counselling and community development approaches, managed by lead agencies, advised by local advisory boards, and accessed via single point-entry is required to support and work with local communities. These appropriately skilled workers need to be integrated with their host agencies, supported by relevant professional development and connected with each other in order to share resources and practice wisdom.
Co-ordination at all levels to allow for long-term response

- Co-ordinated federal, state and local funding to provide a responsive and sustainable rural outreach counselling service for drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.
- Co-ordinated federal (Department of Health and Ageing [DoHA]) and Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs [FaHCSIA]), state (Victorian Department of Human Services [DHS]) and local government funding would allow greater opportunities for a long term response to the emotional impacts of drought, promote information sharing between the drought specific workforce and the co-ordination of projects and practical resources.
- Integrate the knowledge, skills and networks developed by the existing drought counsellors into the ongoing workforce, with designated workers called Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers who would have a broad role to assist rural communities manage drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.
- Experienced drought counselling providers / researchers to brief government services responsible for other aspects of drought recovery (such as The Department of Primary Industries, [DPI], Emergency Management Branch [EMB] etc) on the specific and particular social and emotional impacts of drought to further promote an integrated response at all levels.

Networking between services

- Promote the formation of recovery/change committees in all Shires to co-ordinate all local services in order to promote an integrated response to drought / fire / flood / climate change / socio-economic change.
- Rather than fund short term positions, increased support for designated rural outreach counsellors / workers who are part of on-going rural health services to develop and promote effective strategies for engaging hard-to-reach rural populations. These designated positions should also have the role of informing their host agencies about effective outreach strategies.

Professional development, training & support for specific / designated drought counsellors

- Continue the documentation of practice based evidence for rural outreach counselling, through the continuation of the drought counsellors’ newsletter, No Bull. Support for a shared newsletter would help link federally, state and locally funded designated workers to share resources and prevent isolation, hence maximising shared expertise.

Minimise loss of knowledge gained by workers during intermittent natural disasters, especially drought, including resources developed.

- Develop mechanisms to maintain ‘service memory and hard won knowledge’ in response to drought given its episodic and insidious chronic nature.
- Create local / state registers of resources developed and experienced drought counsellors whose expertise can be drawn on during droughts.
- Provide forums (such as community health counselling regional forums) for experienced drought counsellors to share their practice wisdom with on-going rural counsellors and service managers.

A reliable data collection system that informs the workforce

- Develop a reliable data collection system to record information on rural outreach which feeds back into the service system and practitioners on the ground.

Promote strategies compatible with rural cultures

- Promote research and model development such as Single Session Work and No Bulshit Therapy suitable for rural cultures including models of service delivery that promote and integrate outreach, counselling and community development approaches.
- Conduct advertising campaigns that educate people about the impact of crises, such as drought, on families and normalises the need to talk to others in times of crisis.
- Fund and evaluate No Bull Support, a program which seeks to promote community resilience and strengthen natural supports to help rural communities adapt to change. The niche for No Bull Support is that it is a short (half day) workshop that has wide appeal because it normalises stress in the face of drought and other challenges.

Raise consciousness of the unique impact of chronic, intermittent disasters at every level of policy and service delivery

- Fund projects to ‘kick start’ community development initiatives as communities affected by drought become exhausted and fragmented.
- Integrate direct services and local community initiatives, via projects like ‘Looking Out for Your Neighbour’ to promote linkages between farmers and Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers to ‘kick start’ the resilience of communities exhausted by chronic stress in order to build ‘bonding and bridging social capital’.

Position statement of the drought counsellors across Victoria

- A position statement below, about future drought counselling services was prepared collectively by 70 drought counsellors and related workers who attended the two-day forum in Bendigo (28th & 29th February 2008), called “We Care – No Bull: Celebration, best practice and self-care.”

A sustainable long-term vision is vital to support rural communities as they adapt to social, economic and environmental changes.

The social and emotional support for this work would be facilitated by Rural Outreach & Support Workers, building on the established networks and knowledge gained through the drought work, informed by universal recording systems and supported by co-ordinated information sharing.

A strong and effective service would assist in developing communities’ abilities to address a variety of rural crises (i.e. fire, flood, drought) and support ongoing change, with co-ordinated funding from each level of government, and integration with key services.

To be effective in their work, Rural Outreach and Support Workers would require a repertoire of skills and knowledge, including: assertive outreach capabilities, flexibility and an understanding of the challenges of rural communities. Rural Outreach and Support Workers and their organisations would need to develop effective and innovative ways to combine counselling and community development approaches.

Position statement generated by drought counsellors and health and welfare service representatives in Gippsland

- Two common themes that developed universally across all regions, in keeping with previous drought evaluations, were (1) the need for a sustainable ongoing workforce – rather than a workforce reflecting stop - start funding and (2) that this workforce take responsibility for responding to all stressful disasters and change affecting rural communities. This call is captured most succinctly by a position statement generated during a Gippsland CIG meeting (1/2/2008) attended by 19 professionals including managers, drought counsellors, a DHS drought co-ordinator, rural financial counsellors, relationship counsellors, an agricultural consultant and a PCP representative.

Request to government from the Gippsland Co-operative Inquiry Group drought workers

Demographic, economic and climate change represent a major shift and re-direction in the Australian rural landscape similar to the impact of the Great Depression. Long-term planning, co-ordinated at all levels of government is required to provide social and emotional support to assist individuals, families and communities adapt to these major and cumulative changes.

Local community boards / recovery committees should be established to co-ordinate and advise the response to all acute crises (fire / flood / drought) as well as ongoing change: determining local needs, priorities and workable solutions. Clarity of roles and responsibilities, including lead agencies at each level of government and local services, needs priority to ensure a collaborative approach to supporting rural communities to adapt to the challenges they face.

An ongoing workforce, skilled in counselling and community development approaches, managed by lead agencies, advised by local advisory boards, and accessed via single point-entry is required to support and work with local communities. These appropriately skilled workers need to be integrated with their host agencies, supported by relevant professional development and connected with each other in order to share resources and practice wisdom.
What it is
Looking Out for Your Neighbours’ is a series of community workshops held across Victoria, organised by local VFF branches and conducted by local drought counsellors, with back up from The Bouverie Centre. These workshops have provided much needed information about the effects of stress on physical and emotional health, have offered ideas on ways to ameliorate these, and have identified helpful pathways to access much needed financial, psychological and other supports. At the same time, they have brought people together to talk about the broader effects of drought on their communities, and to explore ways in which they might come together to begin to counter some of these negative effects. These conversations, some of which have occurred during the sessions and others as people milk around after the workshop, have led to the establishment or re-establishment of a range of community activities.

Examples of some community activities developed as a result of ‘Looking Out for Your Neighbours’ workshops:

- A women’s gardening group
- A regular men’s breakfast
- Getting together to have a yarn and help each other fill out the Centrelink forms
- A community barbecue
- Re-invigorating an older men’s social group
- Re-killing consciousness about staying in touch with the older people in the community

How it developed
The ‘Looking Out for Your Neighbours’ project was initiated by members of the Victorian Farmers Federation (VFF) Drought Taskforce and Social Policy Committee in recognition of the high levels of stress and ensuing isolation experienced by many farmers and families affected by drought and other related factors. The Bouverie Centre became involved in the project via Brenda McLachlan of the VFF and promoted and facilitated the collaboration between local VFF members and local drought counsellors.

What it achieved
- Pilot community workshop conducted in Bairnsdale – August 2007
- Project launched by Minister Lisa Neville, Stawell - April 2008
- Resource Kit of workshop materials developed
- Flier developed by VFF
- 26 Individualised train-the-trainer and support consultations to drought counsellors
- 16 Looking out for your Neighbours workshops held with 312 farmers (average 20 participants each)
- A range of community activities established or re-established as a result of the workshops
- A further 17 sessions are already planned through the VFF before the end of October 2008
- A combination of ‘Looking Out for Your Neighbours’ and ‘No Bull Support’ workshops have also been held at a range of Community Houses and with other community organisations.

Feedback
“No matter what - a seed is planted – no matter what - a seed is planted – no matter what - a seed is planted – no matter what - a seed is planted.”

“The future for Looking Out for Your Neighbours
One participant summed it up: “no matter what - a seed is planted – thoughts of ‘neighbours’ are growing.”

For further information or a workshop kit, contact Elena Tauridsley, The Bouverie Centre e.tauridsky@latrobe.edu.au

Approaches which recognise that drought invites self blame and shame
Struggling or losing a family farm or business that has been handed down over generations naturally results in feelings of shame, failure and responsibility to previous generations, but if this loss is due to drought, the absence of a tangible external event to blame (such as fire or flood) seems to encourage self-blame. If a farm is destroyed as a result of fire or flood, the owners and the community blame the event not the farmer. If a farm is lost because of drought, people are more likely to blame the farmer for making poor decisions. The ongoing nature of drought can put pressure on close relationships leading to increased family conflict, as family members begin to blame each other – blaming their response to the drought for their difficulties rather than joining forces against the drought itself (26-7-07. Discussion during car trip following a CIGAR).

The National Drought Policy puts the responsibility for managing drought with the farmer, under a personal risk management framework, and whilst it is understandable that, “Farmers should be prepared for drought years, how can you prepare for 10 years of drought in a row, in the context of climate change’” (Farming couple, 30-10-07). This couple reported that when the husband had suffered an accident several years earlier, everyone had supported the family but now everyone in the community is exhausted by 10 years of drought. Community tension and exhaustion had replaced the usual ready availability of support. They suggested there was a need to lift the mood of the community (see next section).

Providing help in ways that do not shame is an important skill for drought counsellors. A number of people who contributed to the research pointed out that farmers are a proud race (VFF member, couple in an in depth interview) and hence drought counsellors have to develop ways to provide help without shaming. For example, ‘providing resources on each seat during community forums rather than at a specific resource table, so that people don’t have to ‘out themselves’ (An experienced co-ordinator of drought counselling in 2003); (financial grants to whole schools for free excursions, rather than for individual families in financial difficulties” (same worker); Education rather than counselling can work for some and No bullshit therapy’s non-judgemental directness can minimise shame for most people.

Approaches which recognise that drought can exhaust and divide a community
The chronic nature of drought and the fact that it affects everyone differently and at different times can add to community fragmentation. Corresponding with the Birchip Cropping Group research, CIG members repeatedly pointed out that the drought’s effects depend on the specific area (one side of road ok the other not), type of farm, stage in life (for example, young dependents or not) stage in career (early investment heavy debts etc). For example, one farm may be affected terribly leading to anger, and the farm across the road may be relatively unaffected inducing guilt (Drought counsellor presentation at the NBT Workshop Stawell, 2007).

The distribution of water, the different uses of water (cautious use vs expansive use), and the different impacts of drought on different regions can lead to community conflict and tension. Given its intangible nature, the impact of drought is highly contested and fragmented. Corresponding with the Birchip Cropping Group research, CIG members repeatedly pointed out that the drought’s effects depend on the specific area (one side of road ok the other not), type of farm, stage in life (for example, young dependents or not) stage in career (early investment heavy debts etc). For example, one farm may be affected terribly leading to anger, and the farm across the road may be relatively unaffected inducing guilt (Drought counsellor presentation at the NBT Workshop Stawell, 2007).

Prolonged drought can exhaust a community, as people move into individual survival mode and others experience survivor guilt or develop compassion fatigue over time. One drought counsellor from a small community reported that “people don’t have that time for connection any more…because of that survival stuff…not getting into the ute or on the bike and connecting as much” (Loddon-Mallee CIG, 16-4-07). Erosion of social supports creates further isolation and can eat away at community morale, as inferred by a drought counsellor who pointed out that the local field day and local agricultural show was cancelled for the first time in 10 years due to the drought (Loddon-Mallee CIG, 16-4-07).

An understanding of the nature of drought should inform community development approaches, which in turn provide a context in which counselling plays a role. Exhausted communities may need energisers, such as pamper days to ‘kick start’ community action. Community oriented interventions may need to create a culture of ‘we are all in this together, even though we are affected differently.’ Strategies to promote ‘bridging social capital’ as well as ‘bonding social capital’ are needed to build community resilience as people deal with a disenfranchised chronic, intangible and low status disaster.

Jeff Young (Principal Researcher, The Bouverie Centre. For more strategies, see interim report at www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie)
Findings from the Research

Approaches to counselling informed by the nature of drought

No Heroes: approaches which recognise that drought is a somewhat disenfranchised disaster

There are no heroes in the face of drought! Emergency workers and the people they help to survive the ravages of fire and flood are described as heroes in the media and in the broader community, and yet drought workers and their clients are not. Drought counsellors, who tackle suicidality and attempt to help people in impossible financial situations, and the families they help who are battling the slow strangulation of drought, are not typically described as heroes, despite their clearly heroic actions. The community, and hence families, are allowed to think about fire & flood differently from drought - there is less stigma associated with fire and flood and hence more able to seek help more openly. Responses to fire and flood tend to be more social as the whole community joins forces to fight the 'one-off' crisis but due to the insidious and ongoing nature of drought, the impact can be more socially isolating. Drought ‘victims’ receive less community support for example, fewer interstate volunteers, fewer donations, and media coverage cannot be sustained. The chronic nature of drought is in large part responsible for these different community responses. Whilst people can witness fire & flood in real time in the media, this is not possible with an insidious and long term condition like drought (CIG Gippsland 22-6-07), Also No Bull, July 2007, Editorial page 1). Trauma theory, points out that acknowledged and the bearing of witness to the survivor’s pain and loss is a key step in the recovery process. The disenfranchised nature of drought may help explain the complexity of dealing with its psychological impacts, as acknowledged in the pain and loss experienced by people affected by drought is not as obvious nor as forthcoming as it is for fire and flood. Drought counsellors commented that their clients often did not appreciate the significance of the drought impact – and that making this link was surprisingly therapeutic (Gippsland CIG 3-8-07).

I experienced the differences in community response to fire, flood and drought first-hand during a visit to a small Victorian town with my CIG group, in which a local member of the community gave a presentation about the impact of recent fires, floods and drought. This person talked differently when discussing the different disasters. With fire and flood there was a much clearer, ‘us against an objectified enemy’, narrative. He mentioned that whilst waiting for the fire to hit, the town folk responded, ‘come on we’re ready to fight you.’ The resultant social response of sticking together led to a ‘feeling of privilege to be part of it’, he said. There was immediate talk of recovery, ‘we’ll be up and running soon’ both after the fire and flood, that was absent when talking about the drought.

The major observations I made about how the social impact of drought differs from fire and flood during this visit and in the subsequent CIG discussion (Research diary), are as follows:

- The fire had a tangible, objectified status which allowed people to join together to fight against the external force.
- During the presentation, there were a large number of dramatic photos recording the impacts of the fire and flood, but no documentation of the impact of drought. Drought is harder to pictorialise which makes it harder to externalise and for people to bear witness (ie acknowledge its impact).
- Politicians visited flood affected areas by helicopter / large numbers of people arrived to fight the fires. Drought is much less social, it attracts less resources and publicity.
- Fire and flood lead to extra resources being provided to the local district that had been requested for some time. Drought seems less likely to lead to substantial external resources being provided.
- On the trip into this small town, significant road and bridge works were being completed. This provided a powerful and tangible symbol, both that some disaster had hit the area, but also that the reconstruction process / recovery process was underway. There are less tangible activities to indicate the crisis or the recovery process in regard to drought.
- The locals had also built a temporary bridge the day following the flooding taking the bridge out - providing a social, communal, active response to the disaster not readily available for drought.
- A member of our CIG group noted that because people are affected at different times and in different ways during a drought, each person tends to go through the drought individually, rather than as a whole community - as in fire and flood.
- The national media was very interested in the flood, which both got in the way of the practical response (recovery process) but also led to the feeling that the burden was somewhat shared with others (Community member’s presentation).
- The broader community, including urbanites can witness fire and flood in real time on television and newspapers, whereas the chronic nature of drought makes this impossible.
- Drought literally does not gain the same level of community support as evidenced by the funds donated by the general population to support fire and flood but not drought recovery efforts.

A day in the life of Rural Victoria, VicRoads Floodbank

The workshops aimed to reduce some of the pressure people experience when they are not sure what to say or do when they are worried about someone experiencing difficulties due to the drought or other stresses. No Bull Support or NB Support (play on NB as not bothering) was started as a simple approach to providing simple practical steps on how to support others. Community members are doing this crucial work already - NB Support simply helps them do it better.

Drought counsellors (CIG members) were trained to facilitate NB Support so that participants would have back-up if a counselling referral was required. NB Support also provided drought counsellors with good referral reach into the farming and related businesses that are traditionally difficult to engage. Local facilitators followed up each participant by email or phone after the NB Support session, which helped to build this support-referral relationship between drought counsellors and the local community.

Feedback

Feedback from participants in follow-up phone calls consistently highlighted the importance of the workshop in providing practical skills to help support people in a helpful way, down-to-earth information about stress and grief, local referral contacts and connection with the local drought counsellor who was the facilitator.

Specific comments from participants included:
- “Workshops like this are essential for on the ground outreach workers” – Orrobat, April 2008.
- “With the increase in stress generally in community due to drought...why isn’t this session compulsory (for Shire workers?)” – Campaspe Shire, May 2008.
- “I’ve really enjoyed this workshop and believe I have learnt quite a lot” – Wangaratta, June 2008.

The future for NB Support

It is clear that people affected by drought may not seek counselling but do talk to someone. These support people then can get stressed themselves, providing support to their ‘clients’ can lead to more resilient communities, whereas people are looking after each other. NB Support promotes links between local drought counsellors and people who have contact with (and support) members of the target population who won’t seek counselling. Interest in NB Support suggests that the program could be used broadly to support communities facing any difficulties – not just drought. In fact, more recent interest from interstate and subsequent facilitator training of counsellors from Tasmania clearly point the way for this program to have far reaching applicability for both different issues and different regions around Australia.

I would like to acknowledge the thorough and thoughtful work of Judy Poll who has co-ordinated the NB Support program. Judy, who was on secondment to the Bouverie Centre, will return to her position at EACH, in early September.

Jeff Young

For information about NB Support please contact The Bouverie Centre on 9385 5100.
Barwon South West was the last of the DHS Regions to be EC declared and hence was further behind in accessing the otherwise severely impacted regions (for an example, see No Bull, February 2008, page 11). Cold calling, especially the ‘Farm Gate Model’ became very influential, being peer driven. The concept of the Loddon-Mallee CIGs and Barwon South West CIGs. Evaluation of the Campaspe Primary Care Partnership facilitated Farm Gate pathway and warm calling strategy, conducted by members of the Loddon-Mallee CIG, found that of the 200 irrigators visited, 30% of farmers to a practical assistance and 68% ongoing community health counselling (Campaspe PCP).

Warm calling
A drought counsellor in Gippsland (Gippsland CIG #4, 22/6/07) described an approach she called ‘warm calling’, or ‘semi-cold calling’, where she makes contacts at events, like pub nights, and then says “I’ll call if I am in the area.” She’ll then call on people she is worried about.

COUNSELLING SPECIFIC TO DROUGHT
Whilst much of drought counselling is the same as any other counselling (acknowledgement, bearing witness, providing an opportunity to talk, a chance to problem solve or to just reflect), there appear two broad types of specific drought counselling strategies. One is making the most of brief or one-off encounters and the other is being able to chat over a longer period which may or may not gradually move into a counselling type encounter. Both are described below.

Making the most of every encounter
The Grampians CIG emphasised that drought counselling work was often opportunistic and involves taking any chance to chat to community members, “You often only get one chance.” Drought counsellors used single session therapy ideas to make the best of every encounter. Single session therapy is based on accepting the research showing that, (1) the most common number of sessions in most counselling contexts is one; (2) on accepting the research showing that, "The most common number of sessions in most counselling contexts is one; (2) on accepting the research showing that, what used to be ‘normal’ for this region. The South West has been blessed recently with significant rainfall although those ‘in the know’ tell me the depth of ground-soil is nowhere near enough to bring farming back to what used to be ‘normal’ for this region. Furthermore, the high cost of diesel and fertilizer, which has tripled in price in the past 12 months has added to stress levels. For many of the farming community we see, it will take some years to recover financially. The cost to health is rarely measured. I believe the way forward is for drought committees to evolve from drought relief and recovery work to look at the impact of ongoing climate change and the consequent need for farming practice to change. If we are prepared and educated in what is needed for the future then stress, and the potential for stress of our farming community will be easier to manage.

Don’t bullshit
No Bullshit Therapy (NBT) provided a useful framework for the drought counsellors. “Generally there is a lack of understanding in the community about counselling” Grampians CIG (19-3-07). Counselling is often stereotyped and there needs to be greater clarity about what counselling is. A drought counsellor from Gippsland commented, “NBT is useful in de-mystifying the myths surrounding counselling” (CIG #9, 12-12-07). Clients who were suspicious of counselling often describe it as bullshit. Therefore, No Bullshit Therapy acted as a bit of a door opener for the farming clients. As one of the clients stated, “People run from therapy but if you put No Bullshit in front of therapy - rural people are surprisingly open to it trying.”

Counselling to farming communities
Given that outreach is an essential part of counselling work, drought counsellors need to develop skills in moving from chatting to counselling. How to do it effectively and how to do it ethically became a major clinical discussion point across the region. Human connection, as soon as possible and the earlier the better. In practice it is not so easy, as many counselling encounters start genuinely as just a general chat and gradually move into counselling.

Intuition is one of the drought counsellors’ best guides. Tracking the conversation is another: noticing themes that may be linked to a counselling session. The idea of making over the changing of hats can be helpful. Ideas from No Bullshit Therapy were sometimes helpful to mark the change of conversation level in an up front way, making over any constraints to the shift. For example, “In a moment I’m going to ask you how you’re going, because I’m a counsellor and that’s what counsellors do! I know it’s probably the last thing you feel like talking about at the moment, but...”

The Funnel Approach
If there is a crisis point within the general conversation, this can be linked to its impact on other family members. Even the most independent stoic person is often more open to seeking help for their children, partners or friends. With this in mind, a counsellor from the Rural Support Line uses what I call the ‘funnel approach’ with clients who ring in wanting practical help rather than counselling. She asks a series of questions that start broad and general and gradually become narrower and specific. For example, “How’s the drought affecting the region? What’s been the biggest impact on your neighbours? How’s your farm doing? How is it knocking your family around? What’s been the biggest impact on your finances?“ “Now, people who are like you’re under a lot of financial stress. What have you done that’s helped the most? Is there anything I could do to help you?” (No Bull, October 2007, page 12).

Red flagging: Moving in and out of emotional issues
Another approach complementary to funnelling is ‘moving in and out of’ difficult and emotionally laden issues. During the drought counselling presentation at the Shepparton NBT workshop (10-4-08) the local drought counsellors described touching on emotional issues, ‘flagging them’, so they can be returned to but only after moving to lighter issues. This work is consistent with the concept of ‘emotional regulation’ used in trauma work. Emotions that threaten to overwhelm rather than liberate, only re-inforce a feeling of being out of control, a central experience of the original trauma itself. If difficult issues are flagged, the counsellor can move to chatting mode, and negotiate returning the sensitive topic at a later time.

1 Barry Miller uses the term WIT in his work helping Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) clients back into the community.
Drought counselling is different from traditional forms of centre-based counselling. It has components in common with other outreach models and approaches which have been developed for engaging hard-to-engage clients and responding to third party concerns. Cold calling, outreach, community development and counselling all appear to be key components of a comprehensive and effective drought counselling model. Some of the associated skills documented by the research follow.

Combining Practical Support with Emotional Support

Insiders vs outsiders

Informed Workers

Active Outreach

Assertive and third party referrals

A common dilemma experienced by the drought counsellors and the Rural Support Line counsellors is when a person calls, worried about another person (third party referrals). A drought counsellor from Loddon-Mallee reported getting "a lot of phone calls from people worried about someone else. We give advice over the phone, but also offer a direct consultation to the person calling." A typical example was, "Can you check up on Joe because I think he is struggling, but don't tell him I told you." Another common request was from women asking, "How can I support my husband, he won't seek help" (Drought counsellor, presenting during NBT Workshop Stawell, 2007).

Drought counsellors developed a range of strategies for assertive third party concerns without compromising ethical practice, including: coaching the refer as to be more upfront about their concerns with the person; seeing the referer as a client too and providing support for them to help the person; cold calling a whole area where people were identified as struggling; warm calling (see below).

Cold calling

Cold calling is the practice of calling on all farms in a designated area to offer information, support and referral if requested. Cold calling is an engagement strategy and not a counselling approach, although a cold call may lead to a referral for counselling.

Cold calling is a controversial approach, especially for traditionally trained counsellors who worry about the approach being experienced as intrusive by those visited. Concerns of farmers being singled out as needing help are addressed by workers calling on every farm in a designated area. Some drought counsellors advertise the area and time-table of cold calling in local newspapers - to help prepare the recipients for the calls. Initial fears that farmers would act angrily to unsolicited calls did not prove accurate (No Bull, October 2007, page 9, No Bull, February 2008, page 11).

Some host agencies, especially hospitals, do not support cold calling because of risk management policies or the perceived risks to health and safety of workers - this was addressed by people working in pairs or ringing into the office before and after visits.

Business and Community working together in times of Drought

A local independent supermarket in South Gippsland established a drought relief fund, by donating a few cents off selected items to drought relief. This was then distributed to a range of local emergency relief providers to distribute as required. One personer on finding out where the funds had come from was delighted. She said, "Whenever I had a couple of dollars to spare I gave it to the drought relief." A good example of what goes around comes around.

Local Initiative works well

A free entertainment night, called "You can't die laughing" was held for rural families in Leongatha and over 300 people attended. This was a local initiative organised by the South Gippsland branch of the Australian Veterinary Association, South Gippsland Shire Council and Landcare, with catering by the local audience and over 300 people attended. This was a local initiative organised by the South Gippsland branch of the Australian Veterinary Association, South Gippsland Shire Council and Landcare, with catering by the Country Women's Association. There have been a number of enquires from other rural towns based on the write up of this initiative in No Bull, asking for details and hoping to organise a similar event.

Social Impact of Drought Forum

CIG members have contributed feedback and real life examples to Tamworth McGhee who is presenting them to the forum.

The Gippsland CIG reflect on natural disasters

Disaster Fatigue

Fatigue is mental or physical exhaustion that stops a person from being able to function normally. It disrupts the circadian rhythms or internal body clock, the body's natural rhythms which are repeated approximately every 24 hours and which affect body temperature, digestion, hormone levels, sleeping patterns and other functions of the body.

Whilst it is normal to become tired through physical and mental effort, fatigue is also caused by prolonged periods of physical and/or mental exertion during drought, fire and flood disasters, as it has happened across many communities in Gippsland, without enough time to recover.

Mid to Long Term Responses to a Disaster (months to years)

Dr. Rob Gordon, Clinical Psychologist, consultant to the State Emergency Recovery Unit of the Victorian Department of Human Services, points out that some effects of disaster only become obvious after a year or longer. Some of the effects of living under stress for long periods include: economic hardship, poor health, relationship problems with children's development or behaviour, depression, loss of leisure and recreation, loss of friendship networks, loss of sense of direction in life and continuing disturbing memories of the disaster.

The Bowerbird Effect

Besides the obvious (research and reading of local papers) a practical strategy non-farming drought counsellors can use to educate themselves about farming issues is called "Snowballing or the Bowerbird effect" by one drought counsellor. She describes the information she picks up from each farm visit as forming "the basis of chat for my next visit; to be repeated many times along the road, with any other bits that either make me look and sound knowledgeable or well resourced, or is of practical use for the farmer visited."

Do, don't just talk

Rural people value reliability. 'Doing' is embodying an idea. Do, don't just talk Rural people value reliability. 'Doing' is embodying an idea. Do, don't just talk

Discretionary funds and practical supports

Many farmers and associated business people "won't pick up the phone until they are down to their last dollar or last drop of water and then want practical help straight away" (CIGAR). Easy access to discretionary funds seemed to make an inordinate difference and helped with engagement for counselling work 'down the track.' Drought counsellors reported that people they helped had very specific requests and small amounts of funds sometimes led to gains larger than the amount provided. For example, Jim had a million dollar debt but was most stressed about not being able to afford a calculator for his school aged kids. It is important that people calling in local newspapers - to help prepare the recipients for the calls. This meant cold calling and working with different groups outside the health area (eg rural financial counsellors, truck drivers, vets, etc). Many drought counsellors described 'pitching in' to help with practical tasks around the farm or businesses, such as baling hay, milking cows, helping deliver calves, etc to build a connection which sometimes led to counselling.

Cold calling

Cold calling is the practice of calling on all farms in a designated area to offer information, support and referral if requested. Cold calling is an engagement strategy and not a counselling approach, although a cold call may lead to a referral for counselling.

Cold calling is a controversial approach, especially for traditionally trained counsellors who worry about the approach being experienced as intrusive by those visited. Concerns of farmers being singled out as needing help are addressed by workers calling on every farm in a designated area. Some drought counsellors advertise the area and time-table of cold calling in local newspapers - to help prepare the recipients for the calls. Initial fears that farmers would act angrily to unsolicited calls did not prove accurate (No Bull, October 2007, page 9, No Bull, February 2008, page 11).

Some host agencies, especially hospitals, do not support cold calling because of risk management policies or the perceived risks to health and safety of workers - this was addressed by people working in pairs or ringing into the office before and after visits.

Finding from the Research

How to engage rural people who are reluctant to seek help
New to the role but not to the issues - thanks to the support of the CIG network

In this thoughtful and reflective piece, appointed Emma Mahony talks about discovering what is needed in her two roles, one as a Rural Community Support Worker and the other as The Drought Recovery Support Coordinator. Editor)

Role one: Rural Community Support
It is very easy in this role and I am still discovering and developing an understanding of this unique project and the broader drought initiative. The Otway Division project will work in and around the Hamilton area looking at how to identify farmers with mental health struggles and then looking to the follow up process. A focus of the project is broader community based mental health education, along with facilitating getting farmers along to their GP. From here supporting/resourcing GPs in identifying farmers with mental health struggles and the referral and network process beyond this step. In discovering the drought community I have been inspired by the commitment and creativity of all, from the resilience and determination of the farming community, to drought counsellors finding ways to engage and develop connections to the network of services and supports, and working together to develop sustainable resources and networks.

The learnings thus far have been many, learning about the unique experiences of the farming community, with their long history of 'struggling and surviving', their great resilience and common tendency to not seek help or support. I have learnt about the breadth of services and supports around this community that are working to adapt and support farmers and rural communities through environmental, financial and social change. Learning about their resilience and the way they have adapted and evolved with the land and with the changes in environment, culture and family. Valuing and respecting this resilience and capacity to change while acknowledging those who may need support, is the balance and in truth some of the greatest challenge of working in this area.

Role two: Mental Health Support for Drought Affected Communities
The Drought Recovery Support Coordinator role has evolved into the Rural Community Support Worker role, more in line with similar projects across the state and more appropriate for taking a broader approach to build networks and communities that are more able to take care of their own and their friends, partners, families and neighbours mental health across the many seasons and changes ahead. The evolution of the title for this position reflects the changing and adapting necessity for all working with farmers and farming families, both those working on the land directly and those connected to them - no mean feat! So in short, keeping to my paragraph or two, I tend to be a little reluctant to step forward, a bit hesitant to seek help. Particular a breadth of services working creatively to engage and resource a community who are working in this area.

The learnings thus far have been many, learning about the unique experiences of the farming community, with their long history of 'struggling and surviving', their great resilience and common tendency to not seek help or support. I have learnt about the breadth of services and supports around this community that are working to adapt and support farmers and rural communities through environmental, financial and social change. Learning about their resilience and the way they have adapted and evolved with the land and with the changes in environment, culture and family. Valuing and respecting this resilience and capacity to change while acknowledging those who may need support, is the balance and in truth some of the greatest challenge of working in this area.

The loss of young people, including the resulting gender imbalance, contributes to a loss in social capital. Social capital is the human glue that holds a community together - the participation, trust, reciprocity, networks etc. Lower social capital means fewer sporting clubs and other community groups and organisations. In times of drought, social capital is eroded and can become fragmented and lost. The chronic nature of drought, combined with the resulting prolonged economic stress, erodes engagement in activities outside of the bare essentials. The revitalisation of social capital is likely to be a key factor in helping communities manage the impact of drought. Alston finds that in the Illawarra Local Government Authorities (LGAs) she studied, “the dependent that social capital is an important and fragile condition of a rural community's capacity to survive” (Alston, 2004, page 310).

Phillips (2007) points out rural communities are in transition, facing rapid social, economic and demographic change. She argues their survival will depend on continued migration of new residents and the existing communities’ ability to maintain social cohesion while absorbing the new members. For example, the ability to absorb retirees who may have different cultural values to the existing mainstream and rural towns, may be the key to renewal for many rural areas. This ability Phillips calls ‘bridging’ social capital, the ability to create a bridge between the old and the new. She points out that rural communities tend to score higher on ‘bonding’ social capital that is, the internal networks, the ability to get help from friends, family and neighbours when needed but lower on ‘bridging’ social capital. Phillips argues that, “Too much bonding and not enough bridging capital restricts capacity to respond to change” (Phillips, 2007, slide 9).

However, the rate of change also has a significant impact on a community’s ability to cope. Phillips points to a “general rule of thumb that most rural communities can cope with less than 3 percent fall in farm numbers per annum” (Phillips, 2007, slide 6). Drought obviously affects the rate of change and hence the adjustment response. The average fall in farm numbers in the 10 years prior to 1996 was 1.3%, but according to Phillips, the DPI predicts exit rates due to the current drought will be even higher than previous droughts, perhaps temporarily as high as 9% per annum in some production/transition landscapes, due to a combination of factors including global competition, regulated markets, water trading and the high demand for water and land. Rapid change, such as this would lead to significant pressures on employment and social cohesion making the response to drought more difficult.

High disadvantage such as lack of employment options, isolation, lack of internet facilities, combined with low social capital, especially low levels of ‘bridging’ social capital significantly impacts on the ability of communities to respond well to change. Phillips argues that to respond effectively to drought may therefore require redefining these community elements in addition to effective drought counselling. It may be necessary to provide drought counselling in ways that address the elements of disadvantage and promoting ‘bridging’ as well as ‘bonding’ social capital. In other words, developing models of service delivery that integrate counselling and community development approaches may be necessary and hence the relationship between these two approaches is explored in the current study.

What Facilitates Access and Utilisation of Mental Health Services for Rural People?
The smaller and the more remote a community is, the greater the role that ‘Word of Mouth’ seems to play (Boydell, 2006) - both in terms of information about what is available, but also in terms of endorsement of the ‘trustworthiness’ of available services. The latter is presumably even more significant where community members are less familiar or outright sceptical about the service, such as mental health or counselling. A participant in Boydell’s research reported that, “word of mouth is like wildfire. It’s the number one thing, it’s word of mouth. Word of mouth is valuable, invaluable. Indispensable” (page 184).

In her in-depth interviews of 30 parents, mostly mothers of children receiving mental health services in rural Ontario, Canada, Boydell and her colleagues (2006) found that flexible friendly services were not enough. They highlighted the need to ‘bridge’ the call of duty’ helped overcome some of the constraints to seeking help such as the stigma associated with mental health services, as did providing home visits, which allowed clients to be seen in their familiar environment. In addition to providing local services, which also provided less disruption to family life, and less travel expenses, Boydell and her colleagues found that hiring local people for local services was “more culturally acceptable [to clients] and retention rates tend to be higher [for professionals]” (page 186). Access and utilisation of health services is therefore inextricably related to local community; its geography, economics and culture. Therefore in the next section I briefly summarise dimensions of the community development literature relevant to the drought support project.

Community Development
Community development, because of its broad focus and process oriented, dynamic nature, can be difficult to define. As the name suggests, the basic aim of community development is to improve the capacity of a whole community to manage change, survive adversity and develop a sense of community pride and belonging. A summary of this is likely to offend informed readers. Rather than merely providing help to a community, community development also works toward creating the conditions and resources for the community to help itself in an empowering and sustainable way.

Capacity building and increasing social capital are terms used to capture the idea of promoting a stronger functioning community. These terms convey the interconnectedness of social and economic health. The processes associated with rural community development involves working with the community at its own level, in both development and disaster. Community development has a strong philosophical base, hence this brief summary is likely to offend informed readers. Rather than merely providing help to a community, community development also works toward creating the conditions and resources for the community to help itself in an empowering and sustainable way.

Emma Mahony
Rural Community Support Worker
Otway Division of General Practice, Warnambool
0419 897 124
emahony@otway.asn.au

Jeff Young, Bouverie
Contact Carmel Hobbs (c.hobbs@latrobe.edu.au) for more rural / drought references.
Rural Culture and Counselling

Whilst health services need to respond to crises such as drought in ways that are culturally acceptable, they may also need to challenge or address cultural stereotypes and myths about professional help. Powerful insights into how counselling is perceived in farming communities can be surmised from a report called “Critical Breaking Point?” because it is based on research commissioned by the Bicorp cropping group, a farmer driven group across the Mallee and Wimmera in Victoria, not a counselling service. While the body of the report describes farmers as very sceptical about counselling, it reports that 13% of the 60 randomly selected farmers interviewed for the research had experienced counselling in the past and all had found it positive. In what seems particularly counter to the anti-counselling view commonly associated with rural people, 66% of the sample responded, “I don’t think it would be there for those that do”, whilst only 21% responded in the way most commonly expected of farmers – believing it to be simply of no help (Rickards, 2007). The respondents’ qualitative responses suggest that pride and concerns about confidentiality were the main obstacles to engaging with counselling openly.

“What’s the point of talking, talking won’t change anything” is a common refrain in rural communities when counselling is raised. Hall and Scheltens suggest that a perception by rural people that they can’t change things by talking may reflect a general feeling of disempowerment. I wonder though if it is part of a pragmatic culture where rural people are more likely to address practical issues first, then, consider more psychological and emotional issues, only when the practical solutions succeed or fail. This was certainly the early experience of both the telephone and face-to-face drought counsellors, who found that requests for practical support were often followed by counselling, which in turn complemented the practical assistance.

Drawing on their experience of providing support to over 1000 distressed callers from a range of rural communities acutely affected by drought, Hall and Scheltens argue that conceptualising rural communities as suffering chronic disadvantage is more apt and that the impact of drought is only one part of a more complex picture of rural crisis. A number of drought counselling evaluations (Anonymous, 2006, Johnston, 2003, Sartore, 2005) call for support to be ongoing and focused on drought as part of larger changes affecting rural communities. The literature chronicling rural disadvantage and change in Australia is touched on in the following sections.

Rural disadvantage

Hall and Scheltens list the following pre-existing issues affecting rural Australia as underlying the impact of drought: “disruption to family and community in ‘aging’ rural communities; ongoing financial strain faced by many rural people which is not necessarily linked to the drought; confusion experienced by rural families linked to a repositioning of gender roles, particularly where there are strong ‘traditional’ family values; and social isolation, which can contribute to helplessness and domestic violence” (Hall, 2005, page 349).

The authors present a range of case studies of callers who are struggling with these underlying issues, exacerbated by drought, to make their point. The complexity of viewing the impacts of drought in the context of dramatic and ongoing changes to rural life can feel overwhelming, but if drought response is to hear the call for long term planning, it will need to take into account the broader rural context. The following section briefly reports on some of the underlying issues, exacerbated by drought, to make their point. The authors present a range of case studies of callers who are struggling with these underlying issues, exacerbated by drought, to make their point. The complexity of viewing the impacts of drought in the context of dramatic and ongoing changes to rural life can feel overwhelming, but if drought response is to hear the call for long term planning, it will need to take into account the broader rural context. The following section briefly reports on some of the underlying issues, exacerbated by drought, to make their point. The authors present a range of case studies of callers who are struggling with these underlying issues, exacerbated by drought, to make their point.
Rural Support Line

CIGs - Cooperative Inquiry Groups

Gippsland CIG

Left to Right
- Di Robinson: Lakes 51520052
- Peter Carr: Sale 51447777
- Shirley Millard: Latrobe 51436975
- Tracey Moffatt: Bairnsdale 51532012
- Reegan Steen (back row): East Gippsland 51520383
- Lauren Gordon (front): West Gippsland 50623500
- Cathy Carr (back): Gippsland 0418537415
- Jeff Young (front): Bouvearie 93855100
- Lesley Edwards (back): Orbost 51590100
- Judy Richards (front): Maffra 0437360010
- Bianca Pezzotto: Traralgon 0498988857
- Tamworth McGhee: C/W Gippsland 51262899
- John Bell: Bass Coast 56785388
- Sue Armstrong: Bass Coast 56785388
- Not in photo
- Robyn Bradley: Yarrambat 51820270
- Liz Craig: South Gippsland 56743105
- Kay Illingworth: Bass Coast 56785388
- Pam Jarvis: Sale 51447777

Hume CIG

Left to Right
- Jane Rushworth: Wangaratta 57234000
- Louisa Bendendio (Financial Counselor): Wangaratta 57234000
- Terry Reedy: Shepparton 58237032
- Tina Whittle: Bouvearie 93855100
- Les Hume: Shepparton 58235399
- Rachael Robertson: Shepparton 0427840430
- Wayne Harris: Shepparton 58237000
- Christine Cummins: Shepparton 58236000
- Not in photo
- David Bacash: Wodonga 0262288888
- Glen Canning: Shepparton 58235398
- Karen Dean: Shepparton 58235399
- Kirsten Green: DHHS 57220530
- Caroline Harlow: Strathboigie 0408552482
- Ivan Lister: Violet Town 0402856374
- Naaman Mason: Wodonga 0262288888
- Jacqueline Star: Moora 57435200

Rural Support Line

Left to Right
- Jo Verduci: Statewide 1300655969
- Ilvin Li: Statewide as above
- Justine Clear: Statewide as above
- Angela Galpin: Statewide as above
- Not in photo
- Elena Tauridsky: Bouvearie 93855100
- All Lifeline staff who take calls from the RSL

Apart from services needing time to get established, there is also a time lag between rains and recovery from drought at a farming and local community level. In fact for farmers, rain brings with it additional costs needed to take advantage of the rains (Rickards, 2007), such as buying stock, sowing new crops etc. A number of post-project evaluations and drought research projects point out that the full emotional impact of drought only occurs after the most intense period of the drought, just as funding and the wider community is moving onto the next acute crisis. In other words, people often only ‘drop their bundle when they can’ (Young, 2007). The Relationships Australia drought counselling evaluation pointed out that it is only “after rain, (that) other issues such as depression and relationship breakdown come to the fore.” (Johnston, 2003, page 13). The second report of the Birchip Cropping Group’s research (released in July 2008), which describes in-depth follow-up interviews with some of the 60 farming families who were part of the group’s original research, found a greater focus and acknowledgement of emotional issues further down the track. The current study explores this contradiction: that designated drought counselling services are often cut just at the time when people affected by drought are most likely to seek or need counselling support.

The issues faced by drought counselling are common to many rural health initiatives and hence the next section looks at the broader context of help seeking behaviours in rural communities. It is hoped that the current drought project can, in a small way, help inform the provision of rural health services more generally.

Stress, suicide and seeking help in rural communities

The task of providing social and emotional support to people affected by the drought is not an easy one - because providing social and emotional support to people in general is not easy. The ‘Burden of Disease and Injury in Australia’ study found that across urban and rural Australia, mental health problems are the leading cause of years lost due to disability, accounting for nearly 30% of the non-fatally burden of disease (Mathers, Vos & Stevenson, 1999). And yet only one-third of people with mental health problems access health services (Wainer, 2000). Several studies point out that whilst the level of mental health difficulties experienced by rural people is similar to urban folk, rural people less likely to seek help. A recent report written by the Centre for Rural Mental Health (November 2005) suggests that apart from a culture of self-reliance, rural people are reluctant to access counselling services for three broad reasons: 1) a preference to seek help from family and friends; 2) the stigma around mental health problems; and 3) limited knowledge and availability of services.

Non help seeking does not equate with an absence of problems. Whilst rural men are least likely to seek help, the leading cause of death for young men in rural Australia is suicide, (reported in Wainer, 2000). Sartore and her colleagues from the Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health in New South Wales argue that even without the impact of drought, Australian farmers commit suicide at higher rates than the national average and for comparable rural populations around the world (Sartore, 2005). A study by Caldwell et al (2004) indicates that among metropolitan and rural men aged 18-29 have similar rates of mental illness, rural (49.4 per 100,000) and remote (51.7 per 100,000) men in this age range are more likely to commit suicide than their metropolitan counterparts (31.8 per 100,000) and less likely to seek help (11.4 vs 25.2 per 100,000). Caldwell et al’s paper calls for research into “why young men in non-metropolitan areas...do not engage with mental health services” (page 10). Furthermore, men are less likely to seek help for suicidal ideation than for other personal-emotional problems (Carlton & Deane, 2000, cited in Cusack, 2004).

The relationship between drought and suicide is difficult to measure because the insidious and chronic impact of drought means it is hard to determine what is and equally what is, not, linked to drought; although common sense would suggest that an ill-defined, chronic disaster with major economic, social and psychological impacts would exacerbate potential suicides.

It also makes sense that help seeking is related to availability and accessibility of services. For example, access to mental health services is more difficult for people living in remote rural areas given “there are far fewer psychiatrists (by main place of work) for rural and remote populations (3.3 and 1.8 per 100 000 respectively) than for metropolitan populations (14.2 per 100,000)” (Caldwell, 2004, page 10). In the absence of formal mental health services, community resilience building strategies, including providing training and support to the informal local support roles played by lay people, could potentially play a significant role in early intervention and helping prevent rural suicide.
How is drought perceived in Australia?

Reviewing newspaper articles, political speeches and popular literature, West and Smith from the Department of Anthropology at the University of Queensland have written a thought provoking paper arguing that although drought is most commonly described as a “deviant, freak of nature that threatens the community,” one in three of the past 130 years have been drought years (West, 1996, page 94). Given the frequency of drought in Australia, it is surprising that there is not more cumulative documentation and co-ordinated planning for drought prevention, support and recovery. This research project, facilitated by The Bouverie Centre, hopes in a small way to contribute to the debate about how best to respond to the emotional and social impact of drought on individuals, families and communities, by documenting the front-line experience of Victoria’s drought counsellors.

The complex nature of drought

The impact of drought affects people differently, even in the same area. Unlike fire and flood, it is not obvious when a drought begins or when it ends. As a drought counsellor participating in the research pointed out, “each person is affected at different times” and so drought can lead to individualisation, isolation and a significant fracturing of community.

It is not obvious when a community is in recovery mode. As pointed out by Rickards (2007) in a report based on 60 in-depth interviews with random farming families in the Wimmera and Southern Mallee, Victoria, “Not only is the onset of drought gradual, but so is recovery from it” (page 16). This has serious consequences at all levels. For example, at a personal level, people might not realise when they are affected by drought because of its intangible insidious onset. Uncertainty is one of the main psychological impacts of drought (Rickards, 2007), uncertainty about how much it will affect the business and when or if it will end. The intermittent cycles of drought mean that communities and services do not have to face the threat of drought each year and hence preparation and documentation is not continuous. The lack of a tangible change from crisis to recovery also has implications at a government response level. For example, recovery funds that are quickly made available to support people affected by fire and flood, it is not obvious when a drought begins or when it ends. As a drought counsellor participating in the research pointed out, “each person is affected at different times” and so drought can lead to individualisation, isolation and a significant fracturing of community.

The chronic nature of drought

Drought is by nature chronic and long term, Sartho and her colleagues argue that “because of the degree of environmental change wrought, drought may be viewed as a chronic natural disaster, especially as it affects entire communities.” (Sartho, 2005, page 316). The consequences of drought as the drought itself, are long term. It usually takes at least 2-3 seasons for farmers to catch up financially after a drought, but loss of bloodlines built up over generations, for example, may never be fully replaced (Johnston, 2003).

The emotional and social impacts of the different stages of drought are not well understood. In all disasters, people need to address pressing safety and practical problems in the early stages and only begin to become aware of the need for psychological assistance down the track, often when the immediate threat has passed. People affected by drought are probably different, except it is less clear when the main threat begins and when it has passed. Does this set up a context for people to experience a vague but ever present chronic stress, as people experience in response to other long term conditions?

Although drought is chronic, funding for drought counsellors tends to be short term. This stop-start funding (DHS drought forum 16-3-07 complaint from the floor) is a major limitation to the development of effective drought counselling services over time. Financial constraints obviously need to be considered, but drought counselling evaluations repeatedly call for drop stop-start stop-start funding pattern? Would the wisdoms from previous drought counselling services be lost? Would a drought response plan be ongoing? Would drought be part of an integrated response to the range of stresses affecting rural Australia?

Stop-start funding does not allow services to establish a reputation that they are ‘in for the long haul’ or to establish robust networks that lead to co-ordinated services. Rural communities suspicious of counselling are less likely to trust or invest in services that are likely to be ‘here today and gone tomorrow’.
what bouverie has learnt from the drought support project

Engaging with the state-funded drought counsellors, without much rural or drought expertise, meant that we had to truly engage as partners in an unfamiliar area. It helped us to be humble and to learn to be upfront about what we could not contribute but also what we could offer the project; a parallel to how drought counsellors had to approach farmers and business people. Finding ourselves in this position has helped us to ‘de-center ourselves’ in other workforce development projects (promoting family work in Alcohol and Drug Services) we are conducting now. By de-centering, I mean not having to be the lead agency, where we can promote the work of others, celebrating their success, whilst providing our own input - to create something bigger than the sum of the parts.

This project has challenged our ideas about counselling and made us think about ways of marrying community development and counselling in supporting communities. It has helped us to integrate our research program with our community services program to include an action research approach to our training and service development.

Working with the CIGs across the state and conducting No Bullshit Therapy workshops have made us more actively engaged with the rural health and welfare work force across Victoria. As a result we are likely to video conference our professional development programs to rural services interested in hosting these events, starting next year. Thank you, to all those who contributed to our learning.

The Bouverie Team

TWO PHOTOGRAPHIC PROJECTS DEPICT DROUGHT

Previous editions of No Bull have promoted two photographic projects endeavouring to convey the impact of drought in Australia. The first is a travelling photographic exhibition called, A day in the life of rural Victoria, available for loan from the VicRelief Foodbank. The Bouverie Centre borrowed this evocative exhibition for the official opening of our new building in July and its 36 framed images are a treasure. The exhibition is also available on CD. Further information: contact Richard Watts, Business Development and Communications Manager on 03 9362 8300.

The second, called, Beyond Reasonable Drought, is the product of the Many Australian Photographers group, a non-profit association of 80 emerging and well known photographers, who travelled Australia to capture the impact of the ten-year drought on the psyche of the Nation. An example is shown below, for more, visit: www.beyondreasonabledrought.noelb.com/information.html

WINNER

The winner of our ‘Got a photo which expresses the impact of drought better than words’ competition is John Bell, drought counsellor from Gippsland with this photo of his farm in Kongwak. John will receive a weekend away from the farm, courtesy of The Bouverie Centre.

Scope of the Research

The Bouverie Centre conducted the research between December 2006 – September 2008

A co-operative inquiry method, a form of action research, was used to engage drought counsellors and other community members in exploring strategies for engaging and supporting drought affected communities. Drought counsellors were formed into five regional and one central (Bendigo Outreach Line) Co-operative Inquiry Group Action Research (CIGAR) meetings. Each CIG was facilitated by a co-researcher from the Bouverie Centre. The Bouverie CIG facilitators also debriefed together, exploring similarities / differences, themes and issues across the regional CIGs at a Co-operative Inquiry Group Action Research (CIGAR) meeting at Bouverie, and relying on key principles back the local CIGs to explore in greater detail. Hence the CIG network acted as a simple, but elegant ongoing state-wide knowledge generator: gathering and reflecting on effective ways to provide counselling support to rural communities affected by drought. Key components of the research are listed below.

The detailed interim report (December 06 – June 08) is available at www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie. A final report will be available in December 2008.

First two-day forum (22nd & 23rd February, 2007)

- Thirty-five state funded drought counsellors attended.
- The forum provided training in No Bullshit Therapy and a context for networking and sharing of practice wisdom and resources.
- Commitment for establishing a newsletter, with the title No Bull, was achieved along with an email network for sharing resources.
- CIG – CIGAR network
  - Seventy 2-3hr CIG meetings were held in 30 country towns across the 5 EC declared regions of Barwon South West, Gippsland, Hume, Loddon Mallee, Gippsland and the state-wide Rural Support Line (formerly DPSL). All were recorded and summarised.
  - Seventeen CIG facilitator debriefs (CIGAR) were held and transcribed.
  - Over 100 different people attended CIGs over the 18 months.
  - State funded CIGs embraced federal funded drought counsellors, which allowed them to begin working together despite funding being uncoordinated.
  - A one day forum to kick start the CIG in Barwon South West was also held in December 2007.

No Bull Newsletter

- Six editions of No Bull were published. (500 run for editions 1 & 2, 1000 run for editions 3-6)
- Distribution via CIG members and people on a mailing list.
- Hard copy and electronic copies distributed (number distributed is hard to pin point because of the different networks - but most of each print run was distributed).

Email network

- Approximately 25 email distributions (purposefully kept to a minimum) were sent over the 18 month period.
- Email list contains 237 people from 97 different organisations.

The No Bullshit Therapy Workshops

Workshops were delivered in the three towns which provided greatest access within each region, as advised by the local CIG. They were hosted by local drought counsellors and presented by the Bouverie centre.

- Fifteen workshops were delivered in 15 regional centres between June 2007 and May 2008.
- Most of the 15 workshops were over subscribed.
- Overall, 401 participants registered for the 15 NBT workshops, 323 participants attended, 69 did not attend and 9 withdrew.

Second two-day forum (Bendigo, February 2008)

A two day forum was held in Bendigo to mark the one year anniversary of the CIG-CIGAR network. A competition to name the forum was won by Kevin Holmes, from the Loddon-Mallee CIG. The title, “We Care-No Bull: Celebration, Best Practice and Self Care”, reflected key themes from CIGs across the state at the time.

- Sixty-seven participants attended the forum.

Other research components included:

- Pre and Post Drought counsellor questionnaires (35 pre and 19 post completed).
- Problem and progress sheets, used to record the problems people attending counselling presented with, and what helped (65 completed).
- Takeaway sheets, used to record what clients took away from counselling sessions (12 completed).
- Client feedback and advice questionnaires (5 completed).

Two state-wide projects emerged from the research

(See pages 14 and 15)
farmers and community connect project

Looking out the window at our green landscapes, it would be easy to assume that this area was not very affected at all by drought and that once our rainfall picks up the drought effects will disappear. However, this isn’t so and the ‘recovery’ process after drought can be a long road for many farmers, depending on debt levels and how quickly the land is able to recover.

The Farmers and Community Connect Project aims to provide increased awareness within our community that some of our local farmers have been significantly affected by the drought and that the recovery process continues for many of them.

As a small way of acknowledging these challenges within our farming communities, children from the Bona Vista Primary School created artwork with help from local artists and developed ‘self care’ messages which are to be included in the 2009 Farmers and Community Connect Project Calendar. The calendar, supported by local community service providers and businesses, will be available in December 2008.

Lauren Gordon
West Gippsland Healthcare Group
phone 5624 3500
email lauren.gordon@wghg.com.au

CAPE CONRAN GETAWAY WEEKEND
for drought affected farming families

This weekend was organised by Diane Robinson with much help from other members of the Gippsland CIG.

Thanks to all those who helped in any way, including the many funding sources, as without this support the weekend could not have taken place. The goal of the camp was to give families the opportunity, at no cost, to escape the stresses they face on their farms and to put them in a supported environment where they could relax and gain skills to improve their emotional and social wellbeing.

There were 80 participants, ranging in age from 5 months to 75 years, consisting of singles, couples, single parent families, and families of 3 generations. Participants came from all over Gippsland and two families from the Cobram area of NE Victoria.

On the first night (Friday evening) each family was asked to take a quilt square and to produce a picture of ‘your journey to here’ over the weekend. This could be their journey to the weekend, or the journey through life to this point. It was wonderful to see the individuals and families working on these squares and at the same time being able to ‘tell their story’. The participants had each come along carrying their own burdens and by sharing these they were able to support and ‘share the load’. As one person, who had come along after having chemo said ‘my load is small compared to theirs’.

Apart from the long term exposure to drought, some of the participants had also experienced multiple bushfires and floods in the past couple of years, pushing their resilience to the limits. The benefit of the weekend’s open and relaxed format became apparent after dinner on Saturday night when people, who the day before did not know each other, began telling their experiences and venting the ‘pent up steam’. One couple mentioned that they were there because they had recognised that they, “needed a break before they broke”, as highlighted by the following poem, which they wrote on the weekend.

We tried to be strong like the trees
Helping others when the sun shone on
And the only rain was black leaves falling
From a dim, dry sky.

We were strong like trees
But struggling when the waters rose
And in a day, painted our lives in mud

We stayed strong like trees
And helped others after the fires
When the tinsel trees grew in a forest of ash

But when it was time to say goodbye
...the trees were broken.
Tired and broken
Need help
...tired and broken
Goodbye Lara, Mum, Mary

The success of the project was widely recognised and the funding bodies have asked that we run a similar project in March/April 2009. As my position in East Gippsland has been funded by Gippsland Lakes Community Health till June 2009, Teagan Steen (federally funded drought counsellor [EGDDP]) and I are working on this. We are also organising a ‘women’s rejuvenation’ at Cape Conran in late October. For a full report or any information contact Diane via email dianer@glch.org.au

feedback
from the weekend included:

“This is important. It helps to re-focus on what is important.”

“It helps to encourage openness about our problems, feelings and disappointments etc. Hopefully encouraging ‘bottling up’ and the feelings that we may have of overwhelming stress.”

Koorie Leader Rob Wandin shares his knowledge
Welcome to this ‘Research Feedback: Special’ of No Bull: the newsletter of the state-funded Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers. This is the 6th edition of No Bull, the biggest and possibly the last, as the formal support role provided by The Bouverie Centre and funded by DHS comes to an end in September 2008. It has been an absolute privilege for my team to be part of the lived experiences of rural people in Victoria as they’ve been bravely battling the long-term impacts of drought and the even longer term impacts of social, economic and climate change. The work of the Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers is of critical importance in the current climate change debate.

Although not typically referred to as heroes, the people enduring this drought, and the people supporting them, are heros - because their actions over the course of this long and pervasive disaster are clearly heroic. People affected by chronic insidious hardships, whether drought, chronic illness or mental health problems, typically don’t get the social acknowledgement afforded to people suffering more acute and tangible hardships. In recognition of this discrepancy, some might say unfairness, we have penned an acknowledgement on page 24, rather than the usual resources; our intent is sincere not grandiose.

My intention was to dedicate a large amount of this newsletter to all the Co-operative Inquiry Groups (CIGs), but they are in a period of transformation, with many of the State-funded workers seeking new jobs as their contracts come to an end and so No Bull did not want to add to their workload. Instead, we have highlighted only a small selection of the many innovative and creative projects that are occurring across the state and have focused on the research, which The Bouverie Centre has conducted in collaboration with the CIG network.

My colleagues and I felt that it would be respectful to give back to the field the knowledge they shared with us. The research documented the hard won knowledge of drought counselling work from 200 hours of CIG discussions involving over 120 workers in 30 different locations across Victoria between February 2007 and September 2008.

As you can see from the pages that follow, the collected wisdom of the Rural Outreach Counsellors / Workers and their clients is impressive and will add to the practice-based evidence of drought counselling. The key recommendations, for example, which we hope will inform policy, are presented in the middle pages (12-13). I have only selected a small number of key elements of the research to present in this edition. Greater detail is available in the interim report, which documents the work between February 2007 – February 2008. At over 90 pages, it is a taxing read but full of practice wisdom. Most of the CIGs are going to continue post Bouverie’s formal involvement, which is a great outcome of the research. In fact, the CIG groups seem to be growing in size rather than diminishing. Furthermore, Tasmania’s drought counsellors have based their network on our CIG structure – another good outcome. A final report will be available at the end of the year, based on a more detailed analysis of the data and of the whole period, December 2006 – September 2008. All reports will be available at www.latrobe.edu.au/bouverie

Much has been achieved but many tasks remain. Continuing to develop and document the work is important so that specialist drought knowledge can be directly transferred to the rural communities affected by drought, and those communities, all the very best.

Jeff Young, Bouverie (Editor)