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Think About Your Health as well as Your Home this Bushfire and Storm Season

Wentworth Healthcare, provider of the Nepean Blue Mountains Primary Health Network, is working closely with other agencies to urge people living in the Blue Mountains, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and Penrith areas to 'Get Ready' and consider their health as well as their homes ahead of bushfire and storm season.

The Nepean Blue Mountains region has some of the most disaster-prone areas in the country, with many areas experiencing drought, bushfires and floods and extreme heatwaves in recent years.

Wentworth Healthcare CEO, Lizz Reay, said that while 'Get Ready' activities serve as a crucial time for our community to assess their risk and prepare their homes and properties, it is equally as important to consider how an emergency may impact your health and the health of those you may care for.

"In the event of a disaster, it is not uncommon for services to be unavailable for extended periods. Power, water and mobile reception are often disrupted, and road diversions may delay assistance or travel to health services."

"This is particularly true for the Hawkesbury area who can become cut off from main supplies due to bridge closures or main road closures. Knowing your health risks and having a plan in place can help you stay safe and well," she said.

Ms Reay explained that a natural disaster can very quickly become a serious health crisis for those with chronic illnesses, disabilities, or mobility limitations who face increased risks due to isolation, reliance on power for medical equipment, or reduced access to medical services for crucial medications. Things like making sure emergency kits include essential health supplies such as health cards, spare batteries and any necessary medical equipment.

"Being prepared means more than cleaning up your property. It means having enough medication on hand, knowing how to access prescriptions if you're displaced, and making sure your medical records are available online through platforms like My Health Record," said Ms Reay.

Residents are encouraged to speak with their GP about their individual risk and how to prepare, including how to store medications safely during power outages and set up electronic prescriptions. It's also important to establish a support network of neighbours, friends, or carers who can assist in an evacuation.

Ms Reay went on to say that the last few years have not only underscored the importance of the community being prepared, but the critical need for a coordinated response across the health sector throughout all phases of emergency management.

"Primary healthcare providers such as general practice and pharmacies are important touch points during an emergency because they know their community, their patients and their needs. During disasters, Primary Health Networks act as an important link between these providers and



emergency services, helping to identify local health needs and communicate accurate information,” she said.

“Our organisation has spent years advocating for the formal recognition of these roles in state and federal emergency management plans. Last year, we contributed to the review of the NSW Health Services Functional Area Supporting Plan (NSW HEALTHPLAN) which supports the State Emergency Management Plan. As a result of this review, Primary Health Networks and primary healthcare are now formally included in this plan,” she said.

“Our formal inclusion in the NSW HEALTHPLAN has validated this critical role in local disaster preparedness, response and recovery, and ensures that health agencies of all levels are working together to protect our communities,” said Ms Reay.

Ms Reay highlighted the recent work the organisation has done with local councils and other agencies to co-develop disaster planning resources that reflect the unique needs and challenges of the Hawkesbury area.

“We have worked closely with the Western Sydney Health Alliance, which includes Hawkesbury Council, to co-design a health specific disaster planning resource. It outlines those groups who may be at increased risk, such as older people, those with a disability, or those with health conditions who need power for medical equipment and includes a step-by-step guide to help them plan ahead,” she said.

The Health and Wellbeing Resource can be found via Wentworth Healthcare’s Disaster Planning webpages nbmphn.com.au/Disasters-Emergencies

The webpages also include other resources like the Get Prepared App and the Person-Centred Emergency Preparedness plan for those with specific needs, links to Hawkesbury Council’s Emergency Dashboard, and information on other tools such as the Hazards Near Me App.

For 24-hour health advice, visit healthdirect.gov.au or call 1800 022 222. In life-threatening situations, always call 000.