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New Zealand report regarding humanitarian activities

1. New Zealand has close relationships with Pacific Island nations in the South Pacific. On the 29th September 2009 an earthquake magnitude 8.1 occurred giving rise to a tsunami which caused widespread devastation in Samoa and affected people in American Samoa and Tonga (Ninatoputapu).

At least 189 people lost their lives and town centres and villages suffered significant damage to the extent that many population centres were flooded.

New Zealand psychotherapists worked closely with trauma teams often lead by Pacific Island health professionals, the counselling community and volunteers from many agencies in Samoa and in New Zealand.

It was important to approach this humanitarian crisis by consulting cultural advisers who knew what Samoan residents would be most concerned about and work within social and community structures with strong ties to tradition.

Significant knowledge was gained by teams from New Zealand who worked with care and commitment in an environment where the infrastructure had been destroyed and many people were homeless.

The Pacific Island communities in New Zealand initiated networks of assistance which psychotherapists and counsellors joined at appropriate times using appropriate pathways.

2. New Zealand psychotherapists practice in a country where large scale events causing humanitarian disasters are uncommon. However, on the 4th September 2010 an earthquake, magnitude 7.1 occurred in the South Island city of Christchurch. On this date one person died. On 22nd February 2011 another earthquake occurred magnitude 6.3 and 181 persons were subsequently confirmed dead.

The earthquakes were followed by shocks which are still occurring in September 2011. The city centre needs to be rebuilt and there is widespread destruction of homes, infrastructure and land forms.

These events affected many families and individuals to the extent that a significant number of people left the city either temporarily or permanently.

Homelessness, isolation, lack of basic services such as sanitation and grief associated with the loss of family members were all major issues.

Psychotherapists responded by establishing a network of practitioners in Christchurch and throughout New Zealand. These practitioners were available to meet with people affected by the earthquake whether they were Christchurch residents or people who suffered from trauma after hearing the news and seeing the devastation on television. The Association of Psychotherapists supported their members especially those who were affected by the earthquake themselves and those who responded to trauma sufferers immediately.

Psychotherapists worked closely with other health professionals such as counsellors, social workers, psychologists and psychiatrists. Mental health services throughout the country made special arrangements to establish access for people experiencing the effects of trauma.

The work is ongoing and it will be many months before emergency assistance is not needed. Therapeutic services are continuing and it is important to note that some agencies and health professionals gave their services free in order to make sure every person who needed help obtained assistance.

Psychotherapists working in family service organisations are still managing the effects on children and relationships within families.

New Zealand is small enough for communication networks to function effectively and helping processes were set up rapidly when the earthquakes occurred.

Psychotherapists continue to be available to people affected by the earthquakes.

Sincerely,

A Roy Bowden
Vice President
New Zealand
Board of the World Council for Psychotherapy