

Study shows the reality for 'vital' Christchurch quake responders

November 23 2012

Front-line rescue workers in Christchurch put their own needs and those of their families to one side to play a vital role during the Christchurch earthquakes and aftershocks, early results from a study into the occupational health of 600 emergency workers shows.

Some preliminary findings from the joint University of Otago's Department of Preventive and Social Medicine and AUT University study of 600 frontline workers in Christchurch have been released today as a result of recent review processes that have been critical of the [emergency response](#).

The researchers, who spoke to many of these workers, say they took this unusual step (the study is not due to be completed until 2015) because they are concerned that the representation of these workers has been narrow, at times lacking perspective, and potentially undermining for people who respond in emergencies.

"Front line workers in Christchurch and those who flew in to assist them faced risks and challenging circumstances. All of the participants in our study did their very best and employed skills that saved lives. This should be acknowledged and remembered,"; says Associate Professor David McBride, the principal investigator from Otago.

Otago researcher Dr Kirsten Lovelock, a senior research fellow and co-investigator from the Department of Preventive and [Social Medicine](#), has met many of these workers.

"All of the workers I spoke to not only responded to the best of their ability and within the very real constraints posed by this natural disaster, but our preliminary results make it clear they also experienced what we call dual jeopardy,"; she says.

"Many had no time to contact their own families, lost their homes and their [workplaces](#), had family and friends who were injured and are still experiencing a range of issues just as many other people in Christchurch are.

"Despite this, these workers continued to respond - working and [helping others](#) in the days, months and weeks that have followed and in addition to their quake-related response they also continued and continue to respond to a range of daily emergencies.";

She adds that frontline workers are vulnerable to a range of [occupational health](#) conditions related to the risks they face in their daily working lives and responding in times of disaster is known to impact on the health of these workers.

"It would be a shame if criticism with the benefit of hindsight spurred by a desire to "make things better"; was to overshadow what these workers did achieve under very challenging circumstances or worse undermine those who performed vital services during this time,"; says Dr Lovelock.

"While it is important to consider how things can be improved it is also very important to remember this was a natural disaster and front line workers worked very hard to help people under very difficult circumstances."

Provided by University of Otago

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