

# UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEES' PROVISIONS FOR EXPEDITED REVIEWS OF ABOVE-LOW RISK RESEARCH SUCH AS POST-DISASTER COMMUNITY INTERVIEW STUDIES

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Cover: A post-fire interview with community members after the Coonabarabran, NSW, fire in January 2013.

Photo by Brydie O'Connor NSW RFS.



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## ABSTRACT

There is widespread agreement among researchers and emergency services personnel that changes in climate and human settlement patterns in Australia will result in more frequent natural disaster events in future. Emergency management agencies need to know how community members prepare for and respond to disasters. The Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNHCRC) may expect to be asked to respond to requests from emergency services agencies for researchers to go into the field to interview survivors about their experiences quite soon after disaster events such as bushfires, cyclones, floods, and severe storms. Researchers are most likely to come from universities. Some circumstances may require very rapid review of **above**-low risk ethics applications from university researchers seeking to conduct post-disaster field studies, by university human research ethics committees (HRECs). In 2014 Australia's 39 university HRECs were contacted and asked to describe any provisions they had for such expedited reviews. Replies were received from 28 HRECs (72%). Nine of these 28 described provisions for expedited review of above-low risk applications--four described formal procedures, and five described *ad hoc* procedures that could be followed if required. Nineteen HRECs (68%) stated that they had no provisions currently for expedited review of above-low risk ethics applications; six of these discussed possible ways in which such a request might possibly be facilitated depending on circumstances. It was concluded that university researchers who may be asked by the BNHCRC to conduct post-disaster field research involving human participants should investigate their particular university HREC's provisions (if any) for expedited review of above-low risk research well in advance of an actual disaster event and plan for possible post-disaster research accordingly. One approach suggested by several of the responding HRECs was that researchers should prepare a generic ethics application for possible above-low risk post-disaster research, secure provisional ethics approval, and submit a subsequent Application For Modification of the research for expedited approval once the specifics of a study are known.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 BACKGROUND

There is widespread agreement among researchers and emergency services personnel that changes in climate and human settlement patterns in Australia will result in more frequent natural disasters. The Bushfire and Natural Hazards Cooperative Research Centre (BNHCRC) may be asked to respond to requests from emergency services agencies for researchers to go into the field to interview survivors about their experiences quite soon after disaster events. The BNHCRC responded to two such requests to conduct post-bushfire community interview studies early in 2014: with residents threatened by: (a) the January 2014 Perth Hills Parkerville (Mundaring, WA) bushfire, and the January - March 2014 South Australian bushfires in the Eden Valley, Bangor, and Rockleigh areas. Previously, the Bushfire Cooperative Research Centre (BCRC) had conducted six post-bushfire community interview studies over the period 2009 – 2013. All eight studies are summarised in Table 1, which also shows in each case the lead research university which obtained ethics approval from its HREC. The reports of findings from each study are listed at the beginning of the References Section of the report.

**Table 1: Post-Bushfire BCRC and BNHCRC Community Interviews Research 2009 - 2014**

<i>Bushfire Times, Locations and number of interviews</i>	<i>Fire Danger Ratings</i>	<i>Impacts</i>	<i>Lead research university with ethics approval to conduct the study [approval reference]</i>
Feb. 2009, Victoria: Beechworth; Bendigo; Bunyip; Churchill; Horsham; Kilmore East; Murrindindi; Narre Warren (N = 496).	Extreme <sup>a</sup>	173 deaths; 2029 homes destroyed	RMIT University [007/09]. Subsequently: La Trobe University to: (a) take part in the research [Approval letter UHEC 10/03/2009]; and (b) conduct more detailed analyses of the interviews data base [FSTE HEC FHEC10/R55].
Jan. 2011, WA: Lake Clifton (N = 40).	High	10 homes destroyed	La Trobe University [FSTE HEC FHEC11/R4]
Feb. 2011, WA: Roleystone, Kelmscott, Red Hill (N = 456).	High	72 homes destroyed	University of WA [4/1/4530]
Jan. 2013, Tas: S-E Tasmania – Dunalley (N = 217).	Catastrophic <sup>a</sup>	203 homes destroyed	University of Tasmania [H 13:002]
Jan. 2013, NSW: Coonabarabran, Yass, Shoalhaven (N = 238).	Extreme	51 homes destroyed	La Trobe University [UHEC 13-008]
Oct. 2013, NSW: Blue Mountains, Port Stephens, Wingecarribee Shire (N = 194).	Very High - Extreme	221 homes destroyed	La Trobe University [UHEC 13-008]
Jan. 2014, WA: Parkerville-Stoneville-Mt Helena (N = 191).	Extreme	57 homes destroyed	La Trobe University [UHEC 13-008]
Jan. – March 2014, SA: Eden Valley, Bangor, Rockleigh (N = 171).	Severe - Extreme	13 homes destroyed	Central Queensland University [CQUHREC H14/03-037]

<sup>a</sup> Would now be Code Red/Catastrophic



## 1.2 ETHICS APPROVALS OF BCRC AND BNHCRC POST-BUSHFIRE FIELD INTERVIEW RESEARCH 2009 - 2014

BCRC involvement in post-bushfire field interview research began immediately following the 2009 Victorian 'Black Saturday' bushfires (Table 1). The Australasian Fire and Emergency Services Authorities Council (AFAC) commissioned the BCRC to coordinate a Bushfire Research Task Force to investigate aspects of these bushfires—fire behaviour, building performance, and community safety. An important component of the work of the taskforce was to conduct interviews with residents in eight of the worst-affected areas and prepare a report for the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission. RMIT University was the lead research organisation (Chief Investigator: Professor J. Handmer) and approval was obtained from the HREC to conduct a program of interviews with residents threatened by the 7 February 2009 bushfires (reference 007/09). La Trobe University staff (Chief Investigator: Dr Mary Omodei) joined the taskforce after receiving approval from the La Trobe University HREC to do so on the basis of the approval granted previously for the research by the RMIT HREC (UHEC Letter 10/03/2009). La Trobe University researchers were subsequently given approval by their HREC to conduct additional analyses of the interview data base in 2010 (Chief Investigator: Professor Jim McLennan; reference FSTE HEC FHEC10/R55).

Following a bushfire in January 2011 which destroyed homes in Lake Clifton (WA), La Trobe University researchers were asked by the BCRC to organise interviews with residents and prepare a report for the Fire and Emergency Services Authority (FESA). Approval was granted by the HREC on the basis of the previous approval given to staff to take part in the RMIT-lead 'Black Saturday' post-bushfire interview research (reference FSTE HEC FHEC11/R4).

In February 2011, bushfires destroyed homes in the Perth Hills areas of Roleystone-Kelmscott and threatened properties in other locations. Staff at the University of WA were commissioned by the BCRC to conduct post-bushfire research (Chief Investigator: Professor David Morrison) and prepare a report for FESA. Approval was granted by the HREC (reference: 4/1/4530) to an Application For Modification of research conducted by the Chief Investigator which had been approved previously.

In January 2013 the Forcett Fire destroyed homes in south-eastern Tasmania, notably in and around the coastal township of Dunalley. The Tasmania Fire Service requested the BCRC to undertake a program of interviews with residents in the fire-affected area. The University of Tasmania's Rural Clinical School organised the research (Chief Investigator Professor T. Skinner). Ethics approval was obtained speedily from the HREC (reference H 13:002), the process was facilitated by provision of details to the HREC about prior approvals of similar research by RMIT and La Trobe universities.

In January 2013, bushfires threatened many parts of NSW. NSW Rural Fire Service requested the BCRC to undertake post-bushfire interviews with residents in three severely affected areas. La Trobe University was asked to coordinate the research (Chief Investigator: Professor J. McLennan). An Application For Modification of the previously approved post-bushfire research studies was submitted to the HREC. However, the Chair of the University HREC deemed that the proposal would be regarded as a new application (due to the time which had elapsed since the



original approvals) but this was approved speedily (as UHEC 13 – 008) on the basis of those previous approvals.

In October 2013, severe bushfires again affected areas of NSW and a further post-bushfire interview program was commissioned by the BCRC at the request of NSW RFS and La Trobe University was asked to coordinate this (Chief Investigator: Professor J. McLennan). HREC approval of an Application For Modification of UHEC 13 – 008 was obtained speedily.

In January 2014 a bushfire destroyed homes in the Perth Hills (WA) suburbs of Parkerville, Stoneville and Mt. Helena. The Department of Fire and Emergency Services requested that the BNHCRC undertake a program of interviews with residents of the threatened areas and La Trobe University was asked to organise these (Chief Investigator: Professor J. McLennan). HREC approval of a further Application For Modification of UHEC 13 – 008 was obtained speedily.

Beginning in January 2014, several bushfires burned for long periods in several parts of South Australia. SA CFS requested that the BNHCRC undertake a program of interviews with residents in three fire-affected areas. Central Queensland University's Appleton Institute in Adelaide was asked to coordinate the research. An application for approval by the CQU HREC was delayed by the review process (in part, it seems, because the HREC had not previously considered such a request) and at one point the viability of the original proposed arrangements seemed in jeopardy. However, the research was ultimately approved (reference CQU HREC H14/03-037, Chief Investigator Dr K. Thompson).

### 1.3 AIM OF THE PRESENT STUDY

In accordance with the principles on which it was established, all BNHCRC-commissioned research, including research involving human participants, must be undertaken in accordance with the *Australian Code for the Responsible Conduct of Research* (<http://www.nhmrc.gov.au/files/nhmrc/publications/attachments/r39.pdf>). This means such research must first be approved by an appropriately constituted human research ethics committee (HREC). The composition and review procedures of HRECs are, in turn, governed by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007) – Updated March 2014* (<https://www.nhmrc.gov.au/guidelines-publications/e72>).

Following initial uncertainty about obtaining timely ethics approval for the 2014 South Australian post-bushfire research noted above, and in expectation that post-disaster research may be undertaken following natural hazard events other than bushfires (such as floods, cyclones, heat waves and severe storms), it was judged important to find out the general situation across Australian university HRECs concerning arrangements for rapid ethics review of time-critical, above-low risk post-disaster field interview research likely to be undertaken by the BNHCRC.

*Aim:* The aim of the study was to find out (a) how many Australian university HRECs have in place administrative provisions to carry out expedited ethical reviews of **above**-low risk time-critical post-disaster field interview research; and (b) the nature of any such arrangements.



## 2. METHOD

### 2.1 PARTICIPANTS

HRECs at all 39 of Australia's universities were contacted by email and invited to complete and return a brief questionnaire which asked about any provisions for expedited ethical reviews of above-low risk research. Responses were received from 28 HRECs, a response rate of 72%.

### 2.2 QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire (Appendix A) was developed by the author in consultation with BHCRC staff. It comprised a hypothetical scenario about a proposed post-disaster interview study involving greater than low risk, which required review and approval within 72 hours in order to proceed. This was followed by four questions:

- (1) Does your university HREC currently have a procedure which would allow the above-low risk research to be approved within the requested 72 hour time frame?*
- (2) If the answer is YES, could you summarise the rapid review and approval process briefly?*
- (3) If the answer is YES: In the last five years, has your university HREC approved an above-low risk ethics application within a very short time frame such as the hypothetical above?*
- (4): If the answer to Question 1 is NO: in the scenario presented, what would be the minimum time in which the proposed above-low risk research could be approved by your university HREC?*

### 2.3 PROCEDURE

A proposal to conduct the research was reviewed and approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee (Reference: UHEC 14 – 047). The questionnaire, with a covering letter explaining the research, was sent to the HREC contact email address of each of the 39 Australian universities. One follow-up reminder email was sent to those HRECs which had not responded near to the requested return date. Information from 28 returned questionnaires was compiled.

## 3. RESULTS

### 3.1 REPRESENTATIVENESS OF THE RETURNS

There was no correlation between return/non-return of the questionnaire and position of each university on the *2012 Excellence in Research For Australia (ERA) Rankings* (<http://www.australianuniversities.com.au/rankings/>). On the basis of apologetic comments from several HRECs which responded after the notional due date, it seems likely that a major reason for not responding was the workload of staff.





### 3.2 HRECS WITH PROCEDURES WHICH WOULD ALLOW AN ABOVE-LOW RISK RESEARCH PROPOSAL TO BE REVIEWED WITHIN 72 HOURS

Nine of the 28 responding HRECs (32%) described their review procedures which would enable the above-low risk hypothetical scenario described in the questionnaire to be assessed within 72 hours.

Four described formal procedures. These required a complete above-low risk application being submitted, supported by a justification that the expedited review was warranted because of the nature and circumstances of the proposed research. Two of these four HRECs utilised a standing sub-committee with specified membership requirements; these same sub-committees were available to review urgent applications submitted during a Christmas - New Year HREC Office 'shut-down' period. The other two utilised speeded review processes involving electronic transmission of documents and consultation among available HREC members. Only one of the four reported that an expedited review of the kind described had been undertaken in the previous five years.

Five other HRECs explained what is best described as *ad hoc* procedures which could be implemented if required, at the discretion of the Chair. For four, these involved circulation of the proposal to a sub-committee whose membership would be established by the Chair taking into account the nature of the proposed research. Only one of these four reported that an expedited review of the kind described had been undertaken in the previous five years. The fifth HREC reported that an application could be circulated electronically to all members, who would be asked to respond within the time frame OR that an extraordinary meeting of available members could be convened. However, such a procedure had not been implemented within the previous five years.

### 3.3. HRECS WHICH REPORTED THAT THEY DID NOT HAVE PROCEDURES FOR EXPEDITED ABOVE-LOW RISK RESEARCH ETHICS REVIEWS

Nineteen of the 28 responding HRECs (68%) reported that they did not have procedures for expedited ethics review of above-low risk research. One of these HRECs reported that should an application such as the 'hypothetical' described in the questionnaire be received, after discussion with the Chair, it may be possible to arrange a rapid review by available HREC members. Five other HRECs reported that at the discretion of the Chair an attempt could be made to have the application reviewed speedily, but it was unlikely that this could be achieved in the 72 hours specified in the questionnaire scenario. The remaining 12 HRECs reported simply that they had no provisions for expedited review of above-low risk applications.

Ten of the 19 HRECs provided an estimate of the minimum number of days required for review of the hypothetical research. The median number of days reported was 15 (range: 5 – 42).

#### 3.4 *An alternative approach to expedited ethics review of above-low risk research*

Six of the 28 responding HRECs described their preferred alternative approach to ethics review of post-disaster research of the kind described in the questionnaire. This would be for researchers who envisaged possibly undertaking such research to submit a generic application in as much detail as possible well before any post-disaster research was likely to be required,



and secure provisional approval of the proposed research. The researcher should submit subsequently an Application For Modification of the proposal which detailed the specifics of the post-disaster study in question once these were known, for expedited review and approval by the chair.

## 4. CONCLUSIONS

There was a wide variety of responses to the inquiry about whether or not Australian university HRECs had provision for expedited ethics review of above-low risk research. Overall, a little less than one-third of responding HRECs reported that they had some form of such a provision. Clearly, this may constrain the ability of the BNHCRC and some of its university partners to undertake this type of research to learn from disaster events in order to mitigate the impacts of future disasters.

It seems prudent for BNHCRC staff and appropriate research partners to: (a) compile a list of potential future natural hazard events which may warrant post-disaster field research involving data collection from affected community members; and (b) prepare generic outline plans for such research, drawing upon the experience gained from the post-bushfire community member interview studies summarised in Table 1.

Each BNHCRC research partner likely to undertake post-disaster research involving data collection from affected community members should find out what, if any, provisions their HREC has for expedited review of above-low risk research and plan accordingly. The suggestion from some HRECs for a two-stage approach involving, first, provisional approval of a generic application, followed by expedited review of an Application For Modification following a specific event should be explored.

It is suggested that researchers involved in, or contemplating, post-disaster research read: (a) the review by Newman, Risch and Kassan-Adams (2006) *Ethical issues in trauma-related research: A review.*; and (b) Lakeman, McAndrew, MacGabhann and Warne (2013) discussion *'That was helpful...no one has talked to me about that before': Research participation as a therapeutic activity*, if they are not already familiar with these papers.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## APPENDIX A

### Expedited Ethical Review of Above-Low Risk Applications to Conduct Time-Critical Post-Disaster Field Research With Survivors

#### QUESTIONNAIRE

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***Please imagine the following scenario:***

You are contacted in your role as University Human Research Ethics Committee Executive Officer (or similar) by a senior researcher in one of your university's departments. The researcher says that there has been a serious bushfire involving substantial house losses. All residents of the affected area have been evacuated. Most are currently accommodated in a relief centre. The emergency response agency wants the researcher to conduct a research project on its behalf (fully funded) which involves conducting interviews with the survivors currently in the relief centre so as to obtain a systematic account of their experiences during the bushfire. In 72 hours, residents will be allowed back into the area and the survivors in the relief centre will no longer be able to be contacted. The researcher asks you if it is possible for an ethics application for this above-low risk research to be approved within the 72 hour time frame. The next scheduled meeting of the university HREC occurs in 14 days.

**Question 1: Does your university HREC currently have a procedure which would allow the above-low risk research to be approved within the requested 72 hour time frame?**

YES NO

**Question 2: If the answer is YES, could you summarise the rapid review and approval process briefly?**

**Question 3: If the answer is YES: In the last five years, has your university HREC approved an above-low risk ethics application within a very short time frame such as the hypothetical above?**

YES NO

**Question 4: If the answer to Question 1 is NO: in the scenario presented, what would be the minimum time in which the proposed above-low risk research could be approved by your university HREC?**

Thank you for your help.

*Jim McLennan*

Please email your answers to Dr Jim McLennan, School of Psychological Science, La Trobe University:  
[j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:j.mclennan@latrobe.edu.au) by 11 July 2014. If you have questions or concerns, please call me on (03) 9479 5363

Your answers will be kept confidential. Your university HREC will **not** be identified in any report or presentation of the aggregated findings.

Reference: La Trobe University UHEC 14 - 047

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