

# **MEDIA RELEASE**

**NEWS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA**

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ATTENTION: Chiefs of Staff, News Directors

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## **Emergency authorities must adopt new techniques to help people prepare for floods and earthquakes**

Emergency authorities must understand the psychology of people who live in flood or earthquake-prone areas if they are to help them prepare for disaster, according to research by a University of Tasmania academic.

Dr David McIvor's recently completed PhD research found passive presentation of information by authorities on how to be prepared for a natural disaster is inadequate. Very few people act on the advice they are given, he said.

"Civic emergency management agencies need to engage with at-risk communities to identify the information they think is important," Dr McIvor said.

"They need to understand the needs of individual communities – there is not a one-size-fits-all answer to this issue."

Having interviewed people from flood-prone areas in Victoria, Queensland and Tasmania, and also in the earthquake-prone New Zealand city of Napier, Dr McIvor found many people reluctant to prepare adequately.

"This often related to reasons of cost or inconvenience," he said.

"But it was also because they didn't necessarily take in the information they were given in a rational way.

"Some were overly optimistic, over-estimating their abilities to cope. Others down-played their personal risk, comparing it to the risk facing others."

Dr McIvor found that people's reactions to the possibility of a natural disaster are influenced by a number of factors outside themselves; emergency authorities needed to take this into account he said.

"Perceptions of risks and hazards arise through the interaction of cultural biases, social relationships and behavioural strategies.

"People's reactions are individual but they are influenced by the surrounding social environment."

Dr McIvor's research indicated that to help communities to be well-prepared to face natural disasters emergency authorities need to:

- Understand the whole social environment of the community at risk;
- Set up an interactive process to communicate with communities rather than a passive distribution of information to individual homes;
- Engender the community's trust by providing high-quality information;
- Empower people in the community by ensuring a level of responsibility is devolved to them;
- Utilise the competencies and processes of individual communities to facilitate greater community awareness and combat hazard threats;
- Communicate risk-management strategies and information through mainstream community activities because at risk-free times people have priorities other than attending meetings to gain this information;
- Encourage people to view hazard preparation as part of everyday life.

“Ultimately emergency authorities need to realise that that simple awareness of a hazard potential does not mean people will prepare,” Dr Mclvor said.

Dr Mclvor's thesis is entitled *Modelling community preparation for natural hazards: Understanding hazard cognitions*.

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