



Australian  
Academy of Health and  
Medical Sciences

## **Opening Statement**

### **Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee Inquiry into lessons to be learned in relation to the Australian bushfire season 2019-20**

#### **Senate Committee hearing – 29 July 2020**

Thank you Chairman and good afternoon Senators, thank you for the opportunity to participate in today's hearing.

I am Professor Stephen Duckett and I am the Director of the Health Program at the Grattan Institute. I am also a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Health and Medical Sciences, the organisation I am representing today.

The Academy is one of Australia's learned Academies – an independent, interdisciplinary body of 398 Fellows, elected by their peers for their outstanding achievements and contributions to health and medical science in Australia. The Academy's goal is to advance health and medical research in Australia and its translation into benefits for all. I would first like to take the opportunity to express our deepest sympathy for the lives lost during the last bushfire season and the communities that were impacted and are still recovering from the devastation in these difficult times.

Our response to the Senate Inquiry was informed by interdisciplinary expertise from Fellows and other experts in areas such as respiratory medicine, mental health, environmental health and many other disciplines.

The extent and duration of the Black Summer bushfires had a major impact on physical and mental health in Australia – on an unprecedented scale. Clearly we need to address the ongoing impacts. We also need to prepare to mitigate and adapt in response to future events, given that the frequency and severity of such events is predicted to rise during the coming decades.

Our response and future preparedness depend on how well we understand these impacts. At present, we do not always have an accurate picture of the scale of these problems, the mechanisms through which they occur or the most effective strategies for managing them. It is important, therefore, to address these gaps in our knowledge – through research.

In our submission, we highlighted several areas. For instance, concerns around the potential impacts of bushfire smoke on the respiratory health of first responders, volunteers and the broader population were well documented during the bushfires. However, we do not fully understand the underlying biological mechanisms for how air pollution from bushfire smoke causes or exacerbates respiratory problems, particularly in the Australian context. We also have only a limited understanding of the health impacts of prolonged exposure to bushfire smoke. These sorts of questions need to be addressed.

Likewise there are similar gaps in our knowledge of the impacts on mental health, vulnerable groups such as pregnant women and Indigenous communities, eye health, food and water safety, burns and heat stress.

There is an opportunity now, following the devastating Black Summer bushfires, to undertake research to fill these knowledge gaps. This sort of research will need to be prioritised alongside other areas – especially, at this time, with research to help tackle the pandemic.

Going forward, evidence will allow for more targeted advice, especially for vulnerable population groups. Most importantly this public health advice needs to be clear and evidence-based to avoid confusion.

I am happy to elaborate on any of the topics raised in the Academy's submission and to respond to any questions you may have.