

Going the extra mile

THE COMMUNITY SERVICE OBLIGATION (CSO) AND THE WHOLESALERS WHICH SUPPORT IT ENSURED THAT PHARMACIES AFFECTED BY THE RECENT QUEENSLAND FLOODS WERE ABLE TO KEEP SERVING THEIR PATIENTS DESPITE ENTIRE TOWNS BEING CUT OFF, WRITES DR MICHAEL TATCHELL.*

When the floods inundated Queensland earlier this year, there were many stories of communities and families who lost power water, communications, possessions—or worse, their entire homes. No matter how trying the conditions, one thing they didn't lose was access to medicines. Every morning, Bruce Hawthorne, state operations manager (QLD) at Symbion starts his day carefully scrolling through the Bureau of Meteorology's (BOM) website. But it's not

AS THE WEATHER EVENTS MOVED SOUTH, I SWITCHED DELIVERIES FROM BRISBANE TO OUR TOWNSVILLE WAREHOUSE—ACTUALLY REVERSING THE DELIVERY SYSTEM

because he's some kind of weather geek. Instead, Bruce is looking for warning signs.

'Here in Queensland, we expect a monsoon system to build in the northern part of the state every year,' Mr Hawthorne says.

'Every morning I look at the BOM topographical graph to try to get a feel for what's going on with the weather up there and how

that might impact our deliveries and, ultimately, pharmacies and their patients.'

This year, as he had in 2011, Bruce started to see some worrying signs. And 20 years' of experience of Queensland's road network told him what was about to happen.

'The season was very late this year so I was monitoring a monsoon trough and we could also see the low that was starting to build in the gulf. I realised we were potentially going to have a very serious problem.'

'Experience tells us that you can get up to a metre of rain in a day up north, and that the road between Townsville and Cairns would instantly become blocked.'

'That's when we started to make our contingency plans because we know that with our 24-hour delivery pattern that if you don't make a call

early, it stretches to 48 hours and deliveries just won't happen.'

Bruce's predictions proved unerringly accurate. The road between Townsville and Cairns quickly became impassable, stranding dozens of communities. Cairns could be reached by air freight but towns such as Cardwell and Mission Beach quickly became completely isolated.



▲ From the storeroom, to his office and the warehouse, state operations manager at Symbion (QLD), Bruce Hawthorne is passionate about his job.

▼ The roads might have been cut and towns isolated, but that didn't stop the medicine from getting through.

'As those weather events moved south, I switched deliveries from Brisbane to our Townsville warehouse—actually reversing the delivery system. So as the roads cleared, I was able to deliver from Townsville south—it's a long drive to Rockhampton, and it was expensive but it's what was needed to get deliveries through,' Bruce says.

'Then I started to look at other solutions. Barcardine in central Queensland is one of the routes we can sometimes use; I have a very good relationship with a transport

talking to pharmacists or logistics companies, he was urging Symbion's customer service to make follow-up calls to ensure his solutions had worked and deliveries had got through.

To him, that approach is the spirit that underpins the work of the wholesalers within the CSO framework.

'Going the extra mile means spending a lot of time coming up with and negotiating a reliable solution to a problem,' Bruce says.

'If you don't try to nut out a solution it will fail. It has to have a

critically important to the lives of so many people.'

The CSO has underpinned Australia's pharmaceutical wholesaling system since it was introduced as part of the Fourth Community Pharmacy Agreement in 2006. A central tenet of the CSO is timely delivery of PBS medicines to community pharmacies, wherever they may be and whatever the circumstances. This fundamental obligation drives wholesalers' approach to the day-to-day functioning of the medicine supply chain.

Bruce's endeavours to 'go the extra mile' in the recent flood emergency in Queensland clearly demonstrates the ends to which wholesalers will go to ensure essential PBS medicines get through to pharmacies and their patients in a timely way, no matter how severe the emergency. ■

**Dr Michael Tatchell recently retired after 27 years as director, Health Economics with the Pharmacy Guild of Australia. He was a core member of the Guild's negotiating team for all five Community Pharmacy Agreements.*



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owner we use so I discussed alternatives with him.

'The whole idea is that it's about assessment and trying to get the best outcome—and most of the time it's a road freight solution.'

Bruce's days stretched past 12 hours during the height of the crisis, and virtually all of his time was spent with a phone glued to his ear. If he wasn't

high probability of working. It can't sit in a depot or vehicle and it can't be hit and miss—it's too important. You can't rely on back office people who just look at a computer—you have to talk to people on the ground and get information from them, think creatively and follow it through to the end.

'It's very satisfying to know you're part of an overall system that is