

ACU BALLARAT DISASTER EXERCISE

A “code black” emergency involving an active shooter, hostage situation, car crash, death, injury and destruction played out at Australian Catholic University’s Ballarat campus on November 27, but it was all for a good reason.

Final year ACU paramedicine students, police, CFA, SES and ambulance officers responded to the real-world disaster scenario to fine tune their training in the hope they would never actually face the situation that transpired.

In the scenario, a driver crashed a car on to the campus then jumped out and started shooting, leaving a hostage trapped in the car. The gunman then ran into a university building, still shooting, leaving dozens of victims injured or dead.

Students and emergency officers knew something big would happen, but knew no detail about the lone-wolf attack until it was presented to them. To make the exercise completely realistic, make-up artists applied gory wounds on the victims who were then triaged as part of the mass-casualty event.

“This was our ‘code black’ exercise putting 65 final year paramedicine students in to the real-world pressure cooker of a mass scale casualty event,” said ACU Campus Dean Professor Bridget Aitchison. “Police had to find and take down the active shooter, paramedicine students triaged people hit by the car or shot, the SES moved in to pull apart the crashed car while students stabilised the person still trapped, there were triage centres running indoors and outdoors, and even though it was an exercise the adrenaline was still running,” she said.

About fifty students in other years of the paramedicine course, or other ACU courses, volunteered to pose as victims in the horror event. Emergency staff from Ballarat Base Hospital were also on hand watching the mock-disaster take place.



“One of the interesting things is often when emergency services are training, they are training in isolation,” Professor Aitchison said. “Our students are doing their fourth year of study and they have done their practical experience when they go out on placement, but nothing really prepares you for a mass casualty or disaster.”

“You don’t know how you will respond until you’re in it, and by doing a simulation that’s as real to life as possible you get to have a first hand experience of what it’s like to be in that pressure cooker.”

The disaster response also allowed students to understand the workings of a mass casualty scene, the chains of command, control and the rapidly-changing situations they could find themselves in.

Ms Aitchison said the activity, now in its third year, was evidence of the growing public safety partnership between state and local jurisdictions regarding the response to a threat to community safety. “Ballarat and the surrounding region are well served by multiple agencies with expertise in all matters of policing, disaster relief and healthcare. It is vital for us to build on that expertise and reinforce the ties between each of these vital partners to make sure Ballarat services are well prepared for an emergency that may arise.”

Article courtesy of the Ballarat Courier, text by Michelle Smith and pictures by Lachlan Bence.

