

Reality

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How well I remember my recent and past attitude towards disaster planning: "It" came with the "territory" and was something that "had to be done." But recently, for me at least, there has been a rapid and marked change. It seems that within the last year, the number of catastrophic events in this world has increased profoundly. I do not know whether this perception is reality, whether it is due to my naivete based on slim experience with multiple casualties, or whether new awareness has come from being the editor of this Journal, piqued by my participation in the 6th World Congress. Perhaps, it is a function of the improved flow of information which seems to be a result of the people of this world moving closer together, so that formerly hidden events now are known immediately. I do know that there has been a change and that there is much work to be done—and the time is right for action.

Again and again, recent natural and man-made disasters overpower the mind: the earthquake in the Soviet Republic of Armenia which took some 25-thousand lives and injured 45-thousand; earthquakes in the San Francisco Bay area, in Algeria, off the coast of Japan, and in western China; the rash of hurricanes that devastated the Caribbean, the United States, and Mexico; chemical explosions train and bus crashes, ferry aircraft accidents; the injured and dead from mass hysteria at soccer games and the countless victims from typhoons which rake the coastal margins of Asia. It stuns the heart and mind to consider these specters of *natural* events: 242-thousand persons killed and 164-thousand injured in earthquakes in China, 40-million persons killed or injured in the typhoons of 1985; and last month, 19-thousand Chinese were killed and untold more injured by typhoons. And the Disaster Research Center predicts that the number and severity of disasters in "the future will be worse than the present." Just imagine. The numbers killed and injured in national and international conflicts pale in comparison to the numbers of lives lost in these disasters. We have prepared for conflicts, but events like those listed above strike without warning and, with few exceptions, the world community is unprepared. Just imagine!

All this is compounded by the nightmare of what could have happened if the Bay area earthquake had occurred two hours later when 60-thousand persons would have been confined to a dark baseball stadium without public address capabilities, or if the upper deck of a fully loaded stadium collapsed onto the lower deck. Just think! What would have happened at the scene of the crash of that United Airlines aircraft in Sioux City, Iowa (pretty close to home for me) if the disaster plan had not been rehearsed and if the extra emergency care personnel had not been immediately and directly available? Just think!

What a way to be shaken out of my lethargy—away from the attitude that disaster planning is something I "had to do." I remember feeling driven to make it better and safer once before: during and after my first personal experience with what seemed to be "mass" casualties and destruction. The reaction followed the devastation of a small town in Wisconsin by a tornado—nine dead and many injured. I was stimulated to move mountains to enhance local preparedness and tried—only to be blocked by my colleagues who feared loss of control and by the elected officials who had other priorities. There was no support and it was lonely.

Disaster preparedness has been relegated to whatever was left over after all other demands for resources and human energy were satisfied. I wonder if the major reasons

are that *we*, as practicing prehospital emergency medical personnel, tend to shelve disaster preparedness because we feel incompetent. *We* have been programmed to provide care on a one-to-one basis and the thought of having to make the decisions demanded by massive numbers of victims is directly contrary to our training and practice. *We don't want to think about it*, not only those of us who are medically trained, but those who control the resources, regardless of the political system in which they function.

Thus, we have become and remain complacent. Supposedly, our complacency has not yet damaged us, or the careers of those who select politics as their profession, or the populations that we both serve. Remarkably, the level of complacency has melted a bit in areas where the chances for occurrence of catastrophic events are known to be great. When you no longer can ignore potential danger, you act. Some populations are fortunate to be blessed with more resources than others, and have been able to apply more of these resources toward preparedness. I refer particularly to the Japanese, the Israelis, and the Californians who have committed resources to disaster preparedness and they have been rewarded for their efforts in terms of decreased injuries and lives protected. Many other countries are beginning to prepare and they have assembled contingents of highly expert personnel which they graciously lend to those in need when disastrous times arrive. However, these are the exceptions. Other than in Japan, Israel, California, and so very few other places, WE ARE NOT PREPARED.

WE ARE NOT *COMMITTED* TO DISASTER PREPAREDNESS. Most of us have participated in the formulation of disaster plans—we have done it many, many times. We have tried—to the limits of our experience, intellect, and resources—usually with the accompanying realization that little or nothing would result from our efforts! And our limits have been substantial—our experience levels are meager and, until now, there has not even been a mechanism to share those experiences and the body of knowledge that each disaster spawns. We were not aware of the pertinent research and did not know about or use the available expertise. But we have tried—often. We have operated in a vacuum along with other well-meaning persons. Yet, the oft-unspoken expectations of us (physicians, nurses, and EMTs, administrators and politicians) have been real. To others, we seem to possess some mystical abilities—and they apply our expert capabilities from one area of mastery to others quite unknown—perceptions that were unhappily unfounded. So there we were—untrained, without experience guidelines, but subject to great expectations. We were alone. Remember?

Well, if you find yourself alone and experiencing the same gnawing in your gut that I do when these thoughts intrude, then you can identify with my feelings. It—the reality—has changed and *we* find ourselves troubled and aware of the awesome responsibility we bear. *We* must do something: become informed; assume an active role; identify and force the issues in your particular setting; and be realistic about our capabilities. Fortunately, the position paper presented by WAEDM in this issue provides some of the valuable guidelines and support that we need. These guidelines, validated through research, are the work of persons who are as expert as one can get in this elusive field. Moreover, the time is right for action: social consciousness is resurgent and the world community seems ready for our renewed efforts to quell a common enemy. We have the opportunity to accomplish what we never before have been able to do—the basic tools are available, social consciousness can be used to pry necessary resources from other less important “needs,” and, seemingly for the first time, we have support from our peers. *We* are in this together and the time is right. I'm motivated, but it takes you to make the difference—please, join with me and let's make the change together.