

# The 4<sup>th</sup> Pan American Conference of WADEM

Samuel J. Stratton, MD, MPH

---

The 4<sup>th</sup> Pan American Conference of the World Association of Disaster and Emergency Medicine was held October 15 to 17 in Leesburg, Virginia (USA). The regional conference was co-hosted by the Pan American Health Organization. Content of the conference included presentation of scientific papers, and work groups that introduced or continued exploration of important subjects in the field of disaster health.

Richard Brennan, Director of Emergency Risk Management and Humanitarian Response for the World Health Organization, presented the opening keynote address, setting the tone for subsequent work done by attendees over the three days of the conference. In the keynote address, it was stressed that international humanitarian work faces a complex world. While mitigation and preparedness are necessary for success in approaching world crisis, it was admitted that one problem for humanitarian relief in crisis has been slowness of a health response. Lack of logistics, resources, and information has much to do with inhibiting humanitarian responses. In his keynote address, Richard Brennan made the observation that there will be less funding in coming years, with no decrease in tough, hard circumstances that will require evidence-based operations. Three elements for developing systems and structures for the future were identified: leadership, coordination, and accountability. An enlightening statement made in the keynote address was that humanitarian workers are “exposed to the best side of humanity and sometimes the dark side of humanity.”

Themes for research papers presented at the Pan American Conference show the current areas of development for global disaster health. Conference research themes included competency identification and development, psychosocial development, accountability in disaster health, forensic aspects of humanitarian medicine, disaster research priorities, roles of the military and nursing in disaster health, safe medical facilities, children in disasters, coordinating disaster responses, and disaster health terminology.

Conference working group sessions were well attended. One high-interest working group session addressed the roles and accountability of foreign medical teams. Development of field standards for foreign medical teams to accomplish accountability when teams are deployed is a broad task. Work in this area has

been ongoing for at least two years, and was furthered at the conference. Improving the professional standards to which foreign medical teams adhere will improve health and international trust of humanitarian responders.

Another high-interest working group explored the topic of disaster terminology. “Speaking the same language” with an accepted disaster terminology will allow for better communication and reporting in disaster operations, and allow for more precision in the field of disaster health research. This group continued work in developing a consensus for disaster terminology that initially began in Victoria, British Columbia (Canada) during the 2009 16<sup>th</sup> World Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine.

Professionalizing the humanitarian health workforce was another area for which a working group was formed. This group was able to continue work in defining and establishing the standards of practice required for effective humanitarian planning and response. Since the well-publicized difficulties encountered during the humanitarian relief efforts for the 2010 Haiti Earthquake, this area of work has been recognized by many outside the disaster work area as particularly important. Closely tied to this topic was another working group that addressed the problem of adapting response to an event.

The psychosocial aspects of disasters are an important and advancing area of interest that was explored during the conference. Education and research in this area has gained appropriate attention during the past few years, and the area continues to develop rapidly. Equally, disaster research has steadily progressed, and a working group was formed to identify priority disaster research topics.

Attendees at the 4<sup>th</sup> Pan American Conference represented all continents of the world. The work done at the Conference will set the stage for further advancement of the field of disaster health during the 18<sup>th</sup> World Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine which will be held in Manchester, United Kingdom on May 28 to 31, 2013. It is also anticipated that in future issues of *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine*, detailed special reports of the proceedings of the 4<sup>th</sup> Pan American Conference will be published.

doi:10.1017/S1049023X12001628