

Complex Humanitarian Disasters

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With both disasters and the number of people affected by such events on the increase and especially in view of the events of September 11 and subsequent anthrax attacks, the importance of disasters as a medical and public health problem is now widely recognized. This is reflected by the growing number of courses, congresses and workshops on such topics as disaster medicine and humanitarian emergencies. During the past quarter century a score or so of important publications on humanitarian assistance and disaster management have added substantially to the body of knowledge on the medical and public health consequences of disasters and have influenced and changed disaster relief practices in a substantial manner. The critical importance of education and training should be emphasised to those hoping to work in this challenging field. In reviewing existing publications, it becomes evident that all natural disasters, despite their individual character and the differences between them, there are certain similarities as far as repercussions on public are concerned. They provide the possibility to manage medical and public health interventions in using limited resources, provided that disasters are recognised as such in time.

Two decades ago, the term *complex humanitarian disasters* was not commonly used. The focus of attention was usually the plight of refugees fleeing conflicts related to the tensions between the two superpowers, the Soviet Union and the United States. Much has changed in the intervening years. Firstly, the geopolitical context has altered dramatically with an initial increase in the intensity and scope of Cold War-related conflicts in the 1980s followed by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent “epidemic” of ethnic and religious conflicts. Secondly, the public health impact of armed conflicts on civilian populations has significantly worsened, especially during the five years since the end of the Cold War. Thirdly, on a more positive note, there has been a steady increase in technical publications in the form of journal articles, books, and manuals documenting public health outcomes and proposing more effective responses to conflict-associated population emergencies. The term complex humanitarian disaster reflects the multicausal nature and complicated response mechanisms of recent emergencies.

Drought in the African Sahel, refugee crises in Zaire and the former Yugoslavia, floods in Bangladesh, and earthquakes in India and Turkey may not have much in common, but in the investigation, the epidemiologic approach for an intervention has proved powerful. The influence of the publications on the conduct of disaster relief and humanitarian assistance have been profound, and all continue to serve as important desk references for medical and health professionals responsible for preparing for and responding to emergencies and disasters.

A summary of selected key-publications on this issue may be ordered. They contribute in a valuable manner to the preparation, planning and the implementation of a mission on site. High quality training and continuing education remain important factors for the success of work in this challenging field.