

## **Editorial**

### **Are we prepared?**

World Health Organization (WHO) defines 'disaster' as, "a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society causing widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses which exceed the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources."<sup>(1)</sup> Natural disasters are a fact of life. We can neither escape nor can we avoid them. We could, however, reduce or prevent the resulting damage. Ironically, human beings have added their own dimension, called man-made disasters, to them. In the past five years or so, natural disasters have consumed hundreds and thousands of lives. Many cities and towns where once life went on at its full pace have been devastated beyond recognition or have simply been obliterated. Japan is a case in point. Haiti, Southern Australia and Christchurch are some more examples of the human frailty against the wrath of nature.<sup>(2)</sup>

The scale of the damage caused and the looming threat have made the national and international communities to come up with or at least think of an organized response. Many governments and UN agencies have launched a range of initiatives to cope with disasters. The events of the last five years have sent disaster management planners around the world back to the drawing boards. Countries are rethinking their disaster management strategies. The ensuing situation calls for a serious review of our disaster management plans for the Kingdom and indeed for the whole of Middle East. There is no denying the fact that disaster management is a multi-sectoral and an interdisciplinary subject. All participating departments and ministries have their respective and collaborative roles. However, I would like to focus on the envisioned role of the academia and the health sector. I am using the term academia because it is all embracing and cuts across the public and private sectors, and other bureaucratic boundaries. Generally, Middle East does not have a strong tradition of 'think tanks' that continuously research current and future issues and pave the way for future strategies by generating knowledge and information. I would like to propose the formation of think tanks as their research is independent and dispassionate. Hence, the knowledge they generate and manage has a professional merit, is unbiased and is not influenced by vested interests.<sup>(3)</sup> Results of their research drive the decision support mechanisms in both public and private sectors by providing a rational and solid basis for strategies. We do not have much time to wait! The academia in the Middle East needs to put its act together and lay the foundation of this intellectual discourse. Disaster management should be taken up as one of the priority subjects. The knowledge generated would then inform the disaster management strategies not only in Middle East, but across the world.

The second issue I would like to highlight is the strategic role of health professionals in disaster management. Traditionally, Ministries of Interior or their implementing arm the General Directorate of Civil Defense (as in Saudi Arabia 4) are the focal point for coordinating and leading disaster management plans, which makes a lot of sense, as they have to liaise with a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations. They are the best placed to do so. However, I would emphasize the importance of allowing a more strategic role for health professionals, both the public and private sectors, in disaster management planning. Ministry of Health, with the participation of private health sector, is best suited to take this role.<sup>(5)</sup> Perhaps the first step is an internal review of the entire health sector to evaluate preparedness and response capacity of the health facilities in the unfortunate event of a disaster. Central to this review should be a series of robust stress tests to evaluate the preparedness and response capacity of the health sector to hypothetical disasters. Stress tests could be worked out by developing different scenarios based on the last ten years data on natural and man-made disasters. Questions such as, can a particular city or town cope with a 100 injured people? Does it have sufficient logistics? Does it have a database of blood donors? How can it mobilize resources and logistics? Do health professionals have the required level of training? And above all, 'who will be the focal point to coordinate the various bits and pieces in the unfortunate event of an emergency? The results accrued from the stress tests would give us a base line to work on. Comparing it with the

required level would identify gaps. Filling up the gaps would give us a reasonable level of disaster preparedness and appropriate response capacity. Of course, this is a conceptual framework that I have proposed. The actual exercise will have to be planned in much more detail. We may not have all the answers to these vital questions but the corrective work could be initiated once we have completed the stress tests.

I would encourage researchers, without making any distinction between the health and non-health, to think about their role in disasters. I would be happy to offer the pages of International Journal of Health Sciences for publication of any research that adds value to the current body knowledge on disaster management.

#### References:

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