

The role of medical schools in disaster preparedness

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INTRODUCTION

Consequent on persistent global warming and the progressive destruction of the ozone layer it seems that climatic conditions are destined to change for the worse, and that natural disasters will become more serious and more frequent with each passing year. In recognition of this, the 85th United Nations General Assembly plenary meeting adopted the Resolution which officially proclaimed the commencement of the 'International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction' (IDNDR) on 1 January 1990. The IDNDR gives health workers a chance to apply their skills to the natural and other hazards that confront so many communities today¹.

A disaster is defined as an unfortunate occurrence which requires outside assistance in order that the affected party may recover. It represents an interaction between a hazard and a vulnerable situation. Disasters may be classified as either man-made, e.g. nuclear accidents, large aircraft crashes, or natural, e.g. hurricanes, floods, earthquakes, etc. The effects of a disaster depend on several factors:

- (i) where it occurs, especially in relation to population
- (ii) when it occurs, e.g., in the daytime or at night
- (iii) the preparedness of the country for the event
- (iv) the amount of advance warning that can be given, e.g. with an earthquake there is virtually no advance warning, whereas with a hurricane at least 24 h notice is possible
- (v) the seriousness with which persons heed warnings and know what to do
- (vi) the extent to which response personnel are personally affected by the event

In order to cope with emergencies and disasters there is a need to increase the capacity to respond through planned activities involving many sectors.

The health sector has a pivotal role to play in terms of its preparedness to deal with life threatening situations in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, as well as playing a leading role in designing and implementing promotive, preventive and rehabilitative strategies to maintain health and well-being in the recovery phase. Trained personnel is a most important component to the success of disaster preparedness programmes².

In the traditional setting, medical schools' curricula have always addressed issues related to the immediate life-threatening situations by virtue of the clinical skills acquired by their students during the undergraduate phase of their training.

Following on the *Declaration of Alma-Ata* in 1978 and the identification of primary health care as the key strategy for achieving access to adequate levels of health care, many medical schools have established departments of community medicine where none existed previously, or in cases where such departments were already in existence, many upgradings in terms of curricula changes have been implemented.

Community medicine sees entire populations/communities as the 'patient' and adopts a holistic approach to delivering total patient care by the use of health teams. This is in keeping with the World Health Organization's (WHO) definition of health (which embraces the social, physical and mental well being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity). This approach addresses the four major elements of primary health care, i.e., promotive, preventive, curative and rehabilitative aspects of health care delivery, thus creating an expanded role for medical schools in its scope for training health professionals. It is agreed that the response to a disaster must be part of the primary health care system³. Within this scope, the requirements for disaster preparedness training/teaching can now be extended beyond the clinical domain. At the University of the West Indies (UWI) the community health teaching programme has accepted this challenge. The university, when placed in the wider Caribbean setting must see this as a responsibility considering that this region is one of the more disaster prone areas of the world.

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS COURSES AT THE DEPARTMENT OF SOCIAL AND PREVENTIVE MEDICINE, UWI

In general terms, there is a basic core course in disaster preparedness and management which is intended for members of the health team and