

CHAPTER 8

NATIONAL RESPONSE TO DISASTER : NEEDS ASSESSMENTThe assessment of needs and priorities

Following a natural disaster, there is usually a lack of specific reliable information on the extent of damage and of medical need. Often the problem lies rather with an excess of contradictory ill-founded or exaggerated information. The rapid acquisition accurate information or of estimates of known accuracy are prerequisites both for planning of a national relief programme and for guiding international assistance.

Data collection need not impede initial relief work since this can begin on the basis of the information obtained. When adequate preparedness for disaster exists, this information will become available and will include accurate and up-to-date information relevant to the disaster affected area including an inventory of the medical facilities, available personnel, material, transport and communications, both within the disaster area and in adjacent parts of the country. This knowledge will allow a reasoned first estimate to be made of the extent and nature of the likely need created by a given event, and of the resources available to meet that need.

The assessment of needs and priorities involves several steps. Data must be collected, interpreted, and disseminated to potential users, and finally utilized in defining priorities and making decisions. Only the first two aspects are considered here.

Types of data required. Two broad categories of information are required by health administrators :

- (1) General statements about the extent of damage, the area and population affected, functional damage to public services, telecommunications, highways and roads, power and other utilities. The collection of this information is independent of the health administration.