

## **CHAPTER 14: APPENDIX EHC/DISASTER TERMINOLOGY**

## THE LANGUAGE OF DISASTERS

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If the tower of Babel was a language disaster, disaster itself has a language. Whether act of God or act of man, by its very nature - or definition (see below) - disaster most often calls for multilingual assistance. The many governments, agencies, professions and individuals from different parts of the world, representing different languages, specialties, religions, and cultures, yet all imbued with one and the same spirit of providing succor to the helpless, converge on the stricken land to help the victims, who are themselves of different language and background.

Communication among these different people and a certain understanding of the technical, administrative and operational terminology of the many disciplines involved become paramount if the inherent difficulties of the disaster are not to be compounded by an overlay of communications disaster. In what is a multidisciplinary operation, the doctor has to understand the transport engineer, the meteorologist must be able to converse with the volunteer, the administrator with the EMS nurse, the planner with the sanitarian, the mediaman with the nutritionist, the expatriate donor with the local government official and the multitude of actors whose normal life has been suddenly shattered by the earthquake, the flash flood, the refugee exodus or the reactor accident.

If such understanding is essential in the field, it is becoming equally necessary away from the site of action, in planning boardrooms, lecture halls, statistical tables, press centers or medical schools, where disaster preparedness and response are increasingly receiving attention. Indeed it is heartening to notice that after many years of unplanned, ad hoc response, disaster management is now becoming more and more conceptual and systematized, and within this trend, disaster medicine is gradually becoming a specialized field.

All professions, techniques and organized activities generate their own language, their specific terminology and disaster medicine is no exception. Because it is relatively new and multisectoral in nature, its language is broadly based and evolving. In this chapter I shall only give a small selection of terms to show its concept, scope, organization and operation.<sup>35</sup> And as the chapter concerns mainly health professions, I have intentionally chosen terms that are predominately outside the medical field, but which the emergency physician or prehospital nurse will encounter in the course of his or her disaster mission.

## CONCEPTS

### Disaster

The results of a vast ecological breakdown in the relations between man and his environment, a serious and sudden event (or slow, as in drought) on such a scale that the stricken community needs extraordinary efforts to cope with it, often with outside help or international aid.  
Syn. catastrophe.

Cf. natural disaster, man-made disaster, technological disaster, toxicological disaster, creeping disaster, international assistance.

### Hazard

The probability of the occurrence of a disaster caused by a natural phenomenon (earthquake, cyclone) or by failure of man-made sources of energy (nuclear reactor, industrial explosion) or by uncontrolled human activity (overgrazing, heavy traffic, conflicts). - UNDRO

Some authors use the term in a broader sense, including vulnerability, elements at risk, and the consequences of risk.

Cf. elements at risk, natural hazard, risk, vulnerability.

### Health

1. The state of complete physical, mental and social well being, and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity - WHO

2. The state of an individual or a community free from debilitating conditions, demonstrating a reasonable resistance to diseases and living in a salubrious environment.

### Principle of non-refoulement

The international principle according to which a person seeking asylum must not be subjected to such administrative measures as refusal of admission at a frontier post, or if he is already in the country, should not be expelled or obligatorily returned to a country where he might be in danger. This principle is fundamental to the work of UNHCR.

Cf. asylum, country of asylum, refoulement, refugee.

### Risk

The expected number of lives lost, persons injured, damage to property and disruption of economic activity due to a particular natural phenomenon, and consequently the product of specific risk and elements at risk. - UNDRO

Cf. elements at risk, hazard, natural hazard, vulnerability.

### Vulnerability

The degree of loss to a given element at risk, or set of such elements, resulting from the occurrence of a natural phenomenon of a given magnitude and expressed on a scale from 0 (= no damage) to 1 (= total loss). - UNDRO

Cf. elements at risk, hazard, natural hazard, risk, risk indicator, risk map.

## SCOPE

### Armed conflict

State of hostilities in which two or more organized armies are at war against each other. In modern warfare the attack may be with conventional weapons, chemical and/or biological weapons or nuclear weapons.

Cf. Geneva Conventions, CBW, atomic bomb, biological warfare, chemical warfare.

### Civil Defence

The system of measures, usually run by a government agency to protect the civilian population in wartime, and to prevent and mitigate the consequences of major emergencies in peacetime. The wider term civil protection is now preferred.

Cf. civil protection. International Civil Defence Organization.

### Disaster medicine

The study and collaborative application of various health disciplines - eg. pediatrics, epidemiology, communicable diseases, nutrition, public health, emergency surgery, social medicine, community care, international health - to the prevention, immediate response and rehabilitation of the health problems arising from disaster, in cooperation with other disciplines involved in comprehensive disaster management.

Cf. Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED). European Center for Disaster Medicine (CEMEC). World Health Organization (WHO), military medicine.

### Exodus

The massive displacement of a population for various reasons, usually due to political or social conflict, civil or military strife, persecutions and other violations of human rights.

Cf. displaced persons, emigration, refugee.

### Famine

A catastrophic food shortage affecting large numbers of people. It may be due to poor harvests following drought, floods, earthquake, war, social conflict, etc.

Cf. drought, food, food shortage, hunger.

### Natural hazard

The probability or occurrence, within a specific period of time in a given area, of a potentially damaging phenomenon of nature. - UNDRO

Cf. hazard.

### Technological disaster

Man-made disaster due to a sudden or slow break-down, technical fault, error, or involuntary or voluntary human act that causes destruction, death, pollution, and environmental damage.

Cf. disaster, man-made disaster.

## MANAGEMENT

### Assessment

Survey of a real or potential disaster to estimate the actual or expected damages and to make recommendations for preparedness, mitigation, and relief action.

Cf. damage assessment.

### Bilateral Cooperation

Technical cooperation or assistance given by a donor country to a recipient country, through direct agreement between the two governments, without UN or other intermediary.

Cf. international assistance, technical assistance.

### Disaster preparedness

The aggregate of measures to be taken in view of disasters, consisting of plans and action programmes designed to minimize loss of life and damage, to organize and facilitate effective rescue and relief, and to rehabilitate after disaster. Preparedness requires the necessary legislation and means to cope with disaster or similar emergency situations. It is also concerned with forecasting and warning, the education and training of the public, organization and management-including plans, training of personnel, the stock-piling of supplies, and ensuring the needed funds and other resources.

Cf. emergency relief supplies.

### Emergency relief

1. Urgent aid given to relieve suffering and hardship arising from a sudden or unexpected event.

2. Immediate assistance given to persons who are deprived of the essential needs of life following a natural or man-induced disaster.

Cf. disaster relief.

### Nutritional state indicators

Physical, functional and biochemical measurements used to describe with precision the nutritional state of a population group and to quantify the changes that have occurred.

Cf. food and nutrition indicators, nutritional indicators.

### Oxyology

A new term for emergency medicine, involving rapid response, first aid, triage, transport resuscitation, and urgent care.

Syn. emergency medical services.  
Cf. CPR, disaster medicine, first aid, triage.

## LEGISLATION

### Disaster act, law

National legislation that provides the government or its appointed executive with special powers to mobilize the efforts and resources of the nation in face of a disaster or major emergency.  
Cf. disaster legislation.

### Geneva conventions

The body of international agreements consisting of four Conventions (1949) and two Additional Protocols (1977), concerning humanitarian treatment of victims of armed conflict, and put under the responsibility of the International Committee of the Red Cross. The first Protocol regulates the care of the wounded and sick soldiers on the battlefield; the second is about the care of the wounded, sick and shipwrecked in naval warfare; the third on the treatment of prisoners of war and the fourth on the protection of civilians in time of war. Additional Protocols I and II ensure more humane consideration not only in international conflicts but also in national strife, such as the treatment of guerilla fighters.  
See International Humanitarian law, Red Cross.

## METROLOGY

### Absorbed dose

The quantity of a substance (drug, pollutant), or energy (ionizing radiation) received during a given time by a person, group or environment.  
Cf. ionizing radiation, nuclear energy, pollutant, retained dose, gray (units).

### ECU

- = European Currency Unit
- = Unite de Compte europeenne
- = Unidad de Cuenta Europea

### Beaufort scale

Numerical scale from 0 to 12, indicating wind force.

0 calm	7 strong wind
1 light air	8 gale
2 light breeze	9 strong gale
3 gentle breeze	10 storm
4 moderate breeze	11 violent storm
5 fresh breeze	12 hurricane
6 strong breeze	

Cf. Douglas scale, gale, hurricane, storm, wind

## ORGANIZATIONS

### UNDRO

The modified acronym for the Office of the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator, focal point in the UN system for emergency relief, particularly in natural disasters. It mobilizes, directs and coordinates the emergency activities of the various UN agencies and other organizations. It has established the International Disaster Management Information Network (UNIENET), operates the UNDRO warehouse in Pisa, and publishes studies on disaster relief and preparedness. It supervises the annual Sasakawa Disaster Prevention Award for outstanding work in this sector. In emergencies UNDRO dispatches field officers to the stricken site, while in normal times the UNDP Resident Representative acts as its representative also.

WFP = World Food Programme

PAM = Programme Alimentaire Mondial

PMA = Programa Mundial de Alimentos

### World health organizations (OMS, WHO)

The health arm of the United Nations, aims at "the attainment by all peoples of the highest possible level of health." Coordinates efforts to raise health levels worldwide and promotes the development of primary health. Besides multiple public health programmes and actions, it is engaged in disaster preparedness and relief both at headquarters and at six Regional Offices, and coordinates the health sector of UN involvement in major emergencies. Has compiled the Emergency Health Kit.  
Syn. WHO

Cf. Emergency Health Kit, primary health care, public health. United Nations, WHOPAX Report.

## SUMMARY

These are a few of the twelve hundred terms that have been tested over many years in the field, in training programs and briefing sessions and are endorsed by the United Nations Disaster Relief Coordinator as establishing the standard vocabulary of disaster management.

It is the author's conviction that in the difficult emergency situations of multilingual and multidisciplinary disaster action, the use of a commonly agreed language contributes to lessen the Babelian and managerial confusions that often risks to hamper the most well-meaning humanitarian disaster response.

## ENDNOTES

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