

Ethics of Disaster Management, Clinical Care and Research

According to Emergency Disasters Data Base — EM-DAT (WHO), there were 16,000 major disasters and over 500,000 deaths in the last hundred years. In 2006, 44% of disasters occurred in Asia. Large-scale disasters in the past few years, such as the tsunami in Sri Lanka, the earthquake in Pakistan, the floods in India, Hurricane Katrina in the USA, the landslides in the Philippines, the earthquake in China, the Myanmar typhoon and most recently, the earthquake in Haiti, have brought up many novel challenges in the fields of human rights, research, ethics and social policies.

Seen in this light, this special issue of the *Asian Bioethics Review* focusing on ethical issues related to disasters matches a timely need. It brings to the fore a rich collection of real life experiences presented comprehensively by academics from Asia and Australasia.

As this series of articles highlights, although the occurrence of natural disasters may be unavoidable, the subsequent chain of events that takes place after such disasters indicates the repeated breach of ethical conduct by the very professionals who should actually be making a difference in the lives of survivors. It is understandable that even though disasters may be predictable to some extent, they may not necessarily be preventable. However, as articles in this issue indicate, there is a dire need to reinforce the message that a lot needs to be done in the area of ethical conduct following disasters.

Disasters ultimately cause destruction, death, disarray, distress, disease, and displacement. Management of every single component has strong ethical implications. Authors have put forward a concept of “ethical entry” into disaster-affected communities which should be seriously considered by those who are “duty bound” not to add anything negative to the consequences already faced by disaster survivors.

The main article, “A Second Tsunami”, by Citraningtyas *et al.* describes all the classical issues witnessed across tsunami-affected countries. The article highlights some crucial issues such as “power imbalance” that is created by a disaster situation and the “loss of control” by the affected community.

Ahmad *et al.* take a critical look at humanitarian aid introducing a novel, important concept of “philanthropic misconception”. They compare and contrast it with another serious challenge faced in disaster relief and research — that of therapeutic misconception where research participants misinterpret the intervention as routine care. The vulnerability of disaster struck populations makes them even more susceptible to such misconceptions.

Authors warn not to perceive this as a rhetorically radical idea but to take it in its stride to promote the true respect and dignity of survivors. This can be done by observing the highest standards of freely given informed consent, which has become a corner stone in ethical research along with ethical review in protecting the research participants.

Shamim in the Case Corner section presents a succinct and powerful narrative of an alarming encounter which highlights the classic situation of therapeutic misconception and other ethical issues. The case highlights the importance of heightened sensitivity towards the vulnerability of populations in disaster situations. This narrative echoes the issues highlighted by Siribaddana *et al.* on a “parachute research” trying to collect human biological material after the tsunami in Sri Lanka. Both these case studies pose strong questions and challenges to the professional bodies to have a serious look at professional standards and governance in disaster situations. These cases, along with other contributions in this issue, raise the question of enhanced vulnerability of such populations and the need for heightened protection for such populations. They also beg the question of whether or not such violation of fundamental standards of ethical conduct and review amount to professional misconduct.

Siriwardhana in his Case Commentary goes into wider ethical issues as reflected in the Sri Lankan tsunami experience. He highlights one of the most crucial aspects of disaster management ethics which is mostly neglected and not given much prominence, which is the issue of management of dead bodies. However, as his title reflects, he examines the issue from a different angle, describing how the disadvantage can be turned into a window of opportunity to learn from such tragic events.

The series is then complemented by the paper in the insight section by Bhan. The author describes a three-pronged approach towards disasters by focusing the attention of all stakeholders towards preparation, prioritisation and protection.

In a report, the Working Group on Disaster Research and Ethics (WGDRE) describe collective efforts to put a draft proposal on ethical guidelines applicable to post-disaster research. One of the fundamental positions taken by the group was that any post-disaster research undertaken should be relevant to the disaster situation and cannot be carried out in a non-disaster situation. The group formulate a position paper on promoting essential post-disaster research within a robust ethical framework.

Disasters are unfortunately bound to repeat themselves. However, unethical practices that follow disasters can and should be avoided. We believe that ethical debates should not be limited to providing an opportunity for intellectual stimulation alone; they should lead to ethical activism based on passionate but knowledgeable and evidence-based criteria so that changes can actually be made on the ground.

The papers in this issue provide a fertile soil for such ethical activism and serve as a much needed wake up call to the research, ethics communities, disaster interventionists, INGOs and all those who have a stake in disaster management.

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