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Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders

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Abstract

A recent update to an earlier publication by the same authors, this book provides a succinct resource for first responders that addresses issues associated with the recovery and management of dead bodies immediately after natural disasters.

KEYWORDS: dead bodies

Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders
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NOTE: The contents of this review are solely the responsibility of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official views of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

As a follow up to its 2004 publication entitled *Management of Dead Bodies in Disaster Situations*, the Pan American Health Organization's (PAHO) Area on Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief, the World Health Organization, and the International Committee of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies have produced a succinct resource for first responders that addresses issues associated with the recovery and management of dead bodies immediately after natural disasters. *Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders* is a quick reference guide that provides recommendations on inter-agency and inter-organizational coordination; infectious disease risks; body recovery, identification, storage, and disposal; information management; communications with the public and media; and support to family members and relatives of the deceased. Similar to its previous publication, PAHO has incorporated contributions from a broad range of subject-matter experts who have extensive experience in mass fatality planning, response, and recovery.

The purpose of the manual, as stated in the Introduction, is "first, to promote the proper and dignified management of dead bodies, and second, to maximize their identification" (p.1). The Introduction also indicates that the manual "does not provide a comprehensive framework for forensic investigation" and "does not replace the need for specialist forensic identification of victims" (p. 1). Chapter 2 addresses a number of inter-agency and inter-organizational coordination issues associated with the immediate recovery and management of dead bodies. The guidance and recommendations provided in this chapter are intended to supplement a jurisdiction's plans and procedures for emergency response.

Chapter 3 focuses on infectious disease risks associated with the recovery, handling, and management of dead bodies during natural disasters. An irrational fear often arising among response personnel, policymakers, and the general public is that corpses are widespread transmitters of infectious diseases. This myth has resulted in inappropriate planning, response, and recovery efforts by officials in a variety of disciplines. Historical evidence and scientific analysis, however, have repeatedly shown that this is not the case, particularly if the mortality resulted from a natural disaster. This chapter attempts to dispel this and other myths surrounding infectious disease risks of dead bodies by providing accurate and credible information to first responders and the public. As the author of this chapter notes in a previous literature review on the subject, “There is no evidence that, following a natural disaster, dead bodies pose a risk of epidemics. ‘Epidemic-causing’ acute diseases are unlikely to be more common among the general population, suggesting that the risk to the general public is negligible.”¹ In this chapter, however, the term “public” may need further clarification, according to the context in which it is used. Although it states, “The risk to the public is negligible because they do not touch dead bodies,” (p. 6) research has consistently shown that the first persons to immediately assist victims of an emergency or disaster are other able-bodied members of the public in the vicinity of the event, even before the arrival of law enforcement, fire, and other traditional emergency response personnel.²

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 offer clear and concise guidance and recommendations on the recovery, short-term storage, and identification of dead bodies, including useful images, illustrations, and tables for first responders. The topic of information management, which is crucial to any aspect of emergency preparedness and response, is addressed in Chapter 7. Chapter 8 briefly discusses the subject of long-term storage and disposal of dead bodies.

Chapter 9 addresses the important topic of communicating with the public and the media regarding the recovery, handling, and identification of dead bodies. A crucial recommendation not mentioned in this chapter is that emergency response agencies and organizations should carefully select spokespersons who are deemed credible and trustworthy by the community to convey messages to the public. Individuals who are viewed as credible and trustworthy by the public differ according to the specific culture and community. Depending on the specific

¹ Morgan O. Infectious disease risks from dead bodies following natural disasters. *Rev Panam Salud Publica*. 2004;15(5): 307-12.

² For an excellent discussion on this topic, refer to Auf der Heide E. “Common Misconceptions About Disasters,” p. 350-55 in O’Leary M (2004) *The First 72 Hours: A Community Approach to Disaster Preparedness*. Lincoln (Nebraska), iUniverse Publishing. Available at: http://www.iuniverse.com/bookstore/book_detail.asp?&isbn=0-595-31084-2

culture and community, an appropriate spokesperson may be a firefighter, tribal elder, religious leader, or elected official.

Providing support for family members and relatives of the deceased is addressed in Chapter 10. Guidance and recommendations regarding victim identification, cultural and religious aspects, and psychosocial care are offered to first responders. Not mentioned in this chapter is the need for mental/behavioral care, support, and debriefings for the first responders handling dead bodies. Providing support for the affected community, family members, and relatives of the deceased is an important aspect of emergency response and recovery. This support should also consider the needs of first responders because these front-line personnel might be handling dead friends, family, and other community members with whom they are familiar.

Chapter 11 outlines a series of frequently asked questions regarding the management of dead bodies. The answers to these questions reinforce the concepts stated in previous chapters of the manual. At the end are a series of six annexes that provide specific forms and information for first responders to aid in victim identification, tracking of missing persons, and information management. These annexes are also available on the Internet for individual communities to adapt or copy according to their specific needs and interests.

Overall, PAHO's *Management of Dead Bodies after Disasters: A Field Manual for First Responders* is a clear, concise, and well-written resource that provides much-needed guidance to first responders who are recovering and handling dead bodies immediately after a natural disaster. The manual is useful for mass fatality planning and during the immediate response phase where forensic assistance is unavailable. This work may provide the greatest benefit to local jurisdictions in developing countries. This is important because these countries are usually impacted the most by natural disasters and, as the manual points out in its Introduction, "After the majority of disasters the immediate management of human remains is done by local organizations and communities and not by specialist teams of national and international experts." (p. 1)