

University of Alberta High School Model United Nations 2011

World Health Organization – The Question of Access to Healthcare During and After Natural Disasters

Introduction

Every year, approximately 20 percent of WHO member states experience major crises that endanger the health of their people. Over the past 30 years, the number of disasters has doubled, reaching a peak in 2005. As of late 2007, 1.3 billion people across 40 countries grappled with emergencies and humanitarian crises. In many of these countries, services that provided food, safe water, sanitation and vital health services had collapsed. In many of these cases, the national governments were unable to provide support to the people without international assistance. To receive this aid, national governments must admit their inability to care for their citizens, which some governments are unwilling to do.

The World Health Organization is meeting the working number of disasters worldwide by expanding its emergency work. Also, WHO is responsible for assisting with risk-reduction and preparing for emergency situations. These latter functions are typically poorly funded and take longer to implement than the international community expects. Over the last 3 years, WHO has improved their emergency work with 3 developments. These include increasing the demands from member states to strengthen WHO's emergency response operations, the implementation of the humanitarian reform resulting in new responsibilities for WHO, and learning from their experiences in recent crises. As there are many international efforts to import aid and health services into an area that has just been affected by a natural disaster, the difficulties of access to resources, assisting with and administering medication, and gathering a population that is willing to contribute is key to reviving an area.

History

Over the last 20 years, there have been about 6000 natural disasters around the world. A natural disaster is a situation or event which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to national or international bodies to provide external assistance; it is an unforeseen and often sudden event that causes great damage, destruction and human suffering. The World Health Organization defines a natural disaster as a large-scale catastrophe that suddenly disrupts the daily lives of citizens, and was caused by the forces of nature. These include tsunamis, earthquakes, hurricanes, droughts, volcanoes, landslides, heat waves, floods and wildfires. They often cause an immediate need for food, shelter, water, clothing, and nursing and medical care. For a disaster to be entered into the database at least one of the following criteria must be fulfilled:

- 10 or more people killed
- At least 100 people affected
- Declaration of a state of emergency

- Call for international assistance

Natural disasters are broken down into three categories:

- Hydro-meteorological disasters: consisting of floods and wave surges, storms, droughts and related disasters (extreme temperatures and forest/scrub fires), and landslides & avalanches
- Geophysical disasters: consisting of earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions
- Biological disasters: consisting of epidemics and insect infestations

WHO has been noted to enter areas with unreliable information needed to monitor performance and compare information to baseline data. From previous crises, WHO has learnt to strengthen preparedness, develop national capacity to manage risk and reduce vulnerability, and to make use of local expertise during humanitarian interventions. The joint work between WHO and other health partners has strengthened and they have worked to build a reliable platform including experts and emergency operating procedures. The mission of the “Health Action in Crises” (HAC) cluster is to reduce avoidable loss of life, and the burden of disease and disability in crisis-prone and crisis-affected countries. HAC provides support to Member States in developing risk reduction and emergency preparedness strategies. It is also responsible, in close coordination with regional offices and a wide range of partners, for managing the health sector’s response in crises and assisting countries to develop health transition and recovery programs.

Possible Solutions

One solution is to create a plan that strengthens and prepares a country for any disaster that could occur. For a plan to succeed, many citizens within the country need to be educated on their role in the plan should a disaster occur. A framework to fund resources, such as medicine or medical personal, must be developed in order for the country to effectively recover.

Another solution is to define and implement a minimum package of technical cooperation activities for risk reduction and emergency preparedness. This package would be created with the purpose of directly providing aid to citizens and would contain items required to sustain life, such as fresh water, food, blankets and similar items. The resources need for these packages may come from different organizations.

Another solution that would support each of the above solutions is to implement a system that follows up on a country after a natural disaster to ensure that the disaster relief efforts are effective and are making a difference. The system must assess, track, and evaluate different situations and should evaluate responses and should then follow up with strategic planning.

Points of Contention

In December 2007 the WHO established a Health Action in Crises Mission that explains key objectives, guiding principles and strategic directions. Finding ways to implement these suggested actions is important. To reach this goal, the following questions must be answered:

How do we educate people about the actions to take in times of a natural disaster?

How do we prepare ourselves for action in the times of a natural disaster?

How do we efficiently provide access to medical treatments in times of crisis?

How will we fund these strategies and resources?

How do we get every nation to support a global effort healthcare accessibility when natural disasters strike?

Resources

<http://www.who.int/en/>

- a good starting point to learn more about the WHO and its role in the UN as well as links to its specific policies

<http://www.who.int/hac/about/strategy.pdf>

- the health action in crises mission with what has already been suggested by the WHO

<http://www.unisdr.org/disaster-statistics/introduction.htm>

- the statistics of natural disasters over many years

<http://www.who.int/topics/disasters/en/>

- different articles relevant to the topic of natural disasters