



Odontology Section – 2004

F13 Mass Disaster Management With Limited Resources: When to Ask for Help

Allan A. Raden, DMD, MPH*, Gloucester County Medical Examiner's Office, 160 Fries Mill Road, Turnersville, NJ 08012

The goal of this presentation is to present to the forensic community a simplified method for developing a protocol for disaster management when manpower and facilities are not readily available.

This presentation will impact the forensic community and/or humanity by describing an improved method for evaluating the need for additional resources in managing mass fatality identifications.

Disaster, whether man-made or natural, does not always occur where expected or where preparation has been made. Further, many jurisdictions simply do not have the ability to properly manage a disaster scene with regards to security, extrication of remains, if any, and identification of victims. The protocols established in Gloucester County, NJ, could serve as a model for other similarly challenged areas.

Located midway between New York and Washington, DC, in the Northeast Corridor, Gloucester County is predominately suburban, with several large tracts dedicated to agriculture. Several large industries also make their home here. Oil refineries line the western border along the heavily traveled Delaware River. A major metropolitan airport, Philadelphia International, is in close proximity and the county is frequently flown over during takeoff and landing. The land area is approximately 329 square miles.

Emergency planning has been very active recently, with more focus being placed on preparedness post 9-11. A well-defined plan encompassing scene management, facilities management, and manpower allocation has been established. For the purposes of this discussion, focus will be placed on facilities and manpower.

The county employs a full time Medical Examiner with a staff of three full time investigators and two technicians. The morgue facility is located in the county's largest hospital. The maximum capacity would be about ten sets of remains that could be analyzed at any one time. Radiographic equipment does not include a dental unit. However, if a mass disaster should occur, the established facility would be quickly overburdened when figuring in the number of live cases needing treatment. Thus, the Medical Examiner's Office has defined a mass disaster as one that involves ten or more fatalities.

A contingency plan has been developed to address this issue. A large, relatively unused armory located within the county has been designated as a temporary morgue. Most morgue supplies would come from suppliers of such equipment, who are on standby for immediate shipment. Liaisons have been established with these sources, and their inventories are regularly monitored. Manpower, however, is another issue. A large-scale disaster with multiple fatalities could pose a critical manpower shortage of morgue technicians, ambulance drivers, investigators, morticians, pathologists and odontologists. As evidenced by the NY Twin Towers incident, it is clear that shifts would have to be employed as to not create an unfair burden on recovery workers. The lives of recovery workers should not be interrupted to the point where it unfairly taxes their families or themselves. Thus, the Medical Examiner must decide when to ask for help located outside of his or her jurisdiction. For example, an air disaster with fatalities in the hundreds could require the facilities of the nearby Philadelphia County ME's office.

The National Disaster Medical System (NDMS) has been established to aid cities and counties in a time of need, like a multiple fatality incident, where local resources would be over whelmed. One component of NDMS is the Disaster Mortuary Operational Response Team (DMORT). DMORT is composed of pathologists, morticians, morgue technicians, and forensic dentists, as well as support personnel that have been trained and could respond quickly in the event of an incident overwhelming local resources. It is a self-contained operation that could really operate anywhere. However, DMORT only responds when requested by the local Emergency Management Agency. The Armed Forces Medical Examiner is another possible source of help. However, in all cases, the Gloucester County Medical Examiner must *request* the additional help.

There are many questions the local recovery team must ask itself when assessing a mass casualty situation. A mock situation will be used to demonstrate the need for a protocol in determining the level of outside help required.

Identification, Mass Disaster, DMORT