Nurses: Are We Ready for a Disaster?

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Abstract:
Disasters challenge nurses at all levels and specialties to examine their level of knowledge, skills, and preparedness. The momentum for nursing to be better prepared for disasters has accelerated in recent years with the occurrence of catastrophic disasters. However, nursing has a long way to go for the profession to be better prepared through education, research, management and practice. The paper describes recent disasters, comments on areas for better disaster preparation, and offers practical resources to assist disaster nursing development.

Keywords: disaster nursing, disaster preparation, disaster management

Greetings from Japan to all readers of the Journal of Nursing Sciences. I hope that what I have to say in this editorial stimulates some ongoing thoughts and action in disaster nursing preparation in Thailand and elsewhere in nursing management, practice, education, and research activity.

All of us concerned with the health of populations around the globe cannot help but be troubled by what seems to be an increasing number of disasters, small and large, that kill or injure humans and animals, and destroy properties and environments. Such disasters, whether natural or man-made, leave long legacies of pain and suffering: physical, emotional, social, economic, cultural, and spiritual. Whole communities may be dislocated or eradicated.

Some recent disasters
In 2009-2010 a wide variety of disasters occurred globally: train disasters, avalanches of mud or snow, earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons/cyclones/hurricanes, flooding, train, plane and multi-vehicle crashes, as well as the disasters of wartime, terrorism, and multiple and random shootings. The latest disaster has been catastrophic. On January 12 2010, Haiti in the Caribbean suffered a magnitude-7 earthquake, the strongest in 200 years, followed by many aftershocks. By January 15, the United Nations (UN) said there was no way that the numbers of dead, trapped, missing, homeless, or wounded could be counted. Fifteen days after the quake the Haitian President Rene Preval announced that 150,000 bodies had been counted, and some survivors were still being pulled from the rubble. There were severe delays in providing much needed food and clean water supplies, especially in Port-au-Prince where clean drinking water was at a critical level even before the disaster. Long delays also occurred in airlifting out those suffering severe trauma, in burying the dead, and providing shelter to the estimated 1.5 million homeless.

In short, a disaster of this magnitude in a very poor country has called for unprecedented aid from the international community. Extreme difficulties were encountered by aid workers, health professionals, government and non-government workers, and the military due to damaged airfields, political controversy, a lack of infrastructure and resources in the country, and the sheer size of the earthquake damage. The UN commented that the earthquake had severely disrupted transportation, communication, and the activities of the government, and required a host of organizations to support those already working in Haiti. It was also enormously challenging to receive and distribute aid, and medical supplies. By January 31 up to one million people were estimated to be displaced and some commentators believed that it will take at least 10 years for reconstruction to be effective.