Health Emergencies in Large Populations (H. E. L. P): A comprehensive training programme

Summary
This article describes the training programme that the Medical Division of the International Committee of the Red Cross has set up since 1986 in collaboration with the Geneva Medical School and WHO. It is meant primarily for health professionals who will have to deal with large populations in critical situations. The objectives and the organization of the course are described and the results of this training programme are analyzed in terms of number and distribution of participants as well as in terms of impact of the programme on coordination of aid agencies' work.

Background
Over the past twenty years humanitarian aid has increasingly become a matter for professionals, as the organizations involved have gained experience in analysing emergency situations in all their complexity and recognizing the very real risks inherent in ill-prepared and mismanaged aid programmes. As far as health care is concerned, one could say that the early 1980s marked a turning point. Epidemiological analysis of crisis situations became more systematic and health problems among displaced people and and refugees were assessed with regard to the wider context of a comprehensive approach to health. This trend, initiated by a few groups of professionals, called for special training of health-care staff with responsibility for running humanitarian operations in the field.

In 1986, the ICRC set up a training programme to meet this need.

Objectives
The programme has three main objectives:

- to prepare senior health-care staff to take part in emergency operations conducted by the ICRC or other organizations;
- to develop a common approach in order to improve coordination between the various organizations involved in such operations;
- to define the conditions and skills needed to extend emergency operations to situations requiring medium-term and long-term planning.

To attain these objectives, a three-week course (HELP/SOS) was organized to review the health-care techniques most commonly used in emergencies. The course is open to the staff of all humanitarian organizations and also to health-care workers in countries affected by such emergencies, and involves university institutions able to provide teaching support.

Organization
The World Health Organization and the Institute of social and preventive medicine at the University of Geneva Faculty of Medicine were asked to organize the course jointly with the ICRC. The first HELP course, in English, was held in Geneva in June 1986 and has become an annual event. The number of students is limited to 25 to ensure their active participation in the proceedings. A leaflet is drawn up for each course and widely distributed to National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies, UN agencies, non-governmental organizations and ministries of health.
Course participants are selected according to the following criteria:
- their academic training in health care;
- previous experience in dealing with emergencies;
- present or future responsibilities in agencies specializing in emergency operations.

Between 1986 and 1989, there were between 50 and 70 applications for the HELP course each year. Given this demand and the fact that some geographical regions were under-represented, the ICRC, together with Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), decided to offer a similar course (SOS (Salud en Operaciones de Socorro)) in Spanish in San José, Costa Rica. This process of decentralization continued in 1991 with an SOS (Santé dans les Opérations de Secours) course given in French in Brussels and a similar course in English in Manila (Philippines). In each case a university and the World Health Organization (WHO) were involved.

The course lasts three weeks. An attempt is made to give equal time to the different modules, while remaining flexible enough to devote more time to subjects of special interest to the participants (although a certain degree of prescheduling is necessary if outside contributors are to take part). However, the time-table within the modules remains very flexible and changes are always possible.

This method may seem complicated, but it maintains a high level of participation throughout the course by all those present.

Teaching methods

Content

The course covers the subjects regarded as required knowledge for health professionals working in emergency situations. The material is divided into the eight classic areas of health care needing attention in such situations.

- Introduction to planning
- Food and nutrition
- Water and environmental sanitation
- Communicable disease control
- Medical and surgical services
- Epidemiology in emergency situations
- Disasters and development
- International humanitarian law.

The material taught is regularly updated on the basis of experience gained in the field and new operational strategies and techniques.