

The Changing Role of the Auxiliary Medical Services in Hong Kong (HKSAR)

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As a supervisor of one of the voluntary medical services providers, the training of volunteer members on the handling of emergency situations as well as the basic first-aid skills are part of my duties. Recently, we have shifted our focus to the emergency disaster assistance (EDA) role. The scope of emergency disaster responses is becoming broader. The role of HKSAR is similar to that of the army medical services in the UK. We provide more supportive services during emergency situations and stand-by services in crowded situations.

In April 1999, the role of the Service changed and our members are training formally to become the EDA within three years time. It is based on the Canadian EMA experience modified to our situation and members. The reasons for the changes in our role include: 1) The importance and focus of prehospital stabilization internationally; 2) The increasing numbers of the disaster-like accidents and multi-casualty incidents (MCIs); 3) The increasing expectations of general public for AMS; 4) The generalization of the first aid knowledge for the public; and 5) coordination with the other related bodies in response to the disaster. Greater focus is expected on regular training and drilling so as to: 1) maintain the morale and to sustained the confidence in their abilities for providing EMA services; 2) familiarize them with the new function role and protocols; and 3) apply the international standards during the disaster.

A disaster is present when resources are outweighed by the event; however, when we try to be prepared for everything and be ready for everything, then we will not be surprised by anything.

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Volcanoes and their Potentially Devastating Effects: Case Studies from the Pacific Ring-of-Fire

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The Pacific Ocean is ringed by a chain of volcanoes potentially capable of devastating eruptions. Every year, there are numerous eruptions world-wide, but the bulk of these are within the Pacific Ring-of-Fire. For instance, during a period of two months in late 1999, there were 22 reported eruptions; of these, only two were outside the Pacific Ring-of-Fire. This same land area also is home to nearly two billion people!

With increased globalization of economies and closer socio-economic ties between countries, disasters can threaten not just a single country, but can impact an entire region. Effects may ripple affects through the global economy. Volcanic disasters can be particularly devastating because their impact can be more far reaching than are those of other natural disasters such as earthquakes or storms.

The time leading up to an eruption is an extremely difficult time for the local inhabitants. The science of volcanology has progressed significantly during the last 25 years; many of these gains have been made through the study of the 18 May 1980 and subsequent eruptions of Mt. St. Helens. Volcanologists now are much better able to provide predictions and forecasts for volcanic events; however, it still is an inexact science. This inexactitude is translated into uncertainty, for the people living close to a volcano. Volcanologists can state with some certainty that a volcano will erupt, but the precise time and magnitude of the eruption remain largely unknown. The initial prediction of an eruption can lead to mass evacuations of wide areas surrounding a volcano. If an eruption does not occur almost immediately, the political ramifications of these evacuations can become very high. The volcano may appear to lay people not to be particularly dangerous, and after a few days, the pressure to lift the evacuation notice can become extremely large. The consequences, however, could be very grave. Officials in these areas face a very difficult task of weighing the scientific evidence against political pressure. Over the past year, there have been several areas in which mass evacuations have been ordered: Mexico (Colima and Popocatepetl), Ecuador (Guagua Pichincha and Tungurahua), Philippines (Mt. Mayon), and Japan (Mt. Usu). None of these volcanoes have resulted in a large eruption; however, the evacuations have lasted for months and, in some cases, several years. The longer the activity continues, the greater the effects are on the local population, and the greater the possibility for a more significant regional socio-economic impact, even in the absence of a major eruption.

Following a large eruption, vast regions around the volcano can be made inhospitable for months to years or even decades. Almost a decade later, large areas around the Pinatubo volcano in the Philippines remain inhospitable due to flooding and mudflows. Thousands of people have been displaced permanently. Ash clouds can travel thousands of kilometers, creating acid rain and global climatic