

***Introduction to the CD-ROM and Tsunami-related
Publications***

***By
Dr Samlee Plianbangchang
Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia***

at

A Day of Remembrance (Tsunami Anniversary)

***WHO/SEARO, New Delhi, India
26 December 2005***

A Day of Remembrance (Tsunami Anniversary)

26 December 2005

WHO/SEARO, New Delhi, India

Introduction to the CR-ROM and Tsunami-related Publications

By

**DR SAMLEE PLIANBANGCHANG
REGIONAL DIRECTOR, WHO SOUTH-EAST ASIA**

1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CD-ROM

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am happy to launch the CD-ROM entitled "Tsunami and the Health Sector: Voices from the Field".

WHO recognizes the dedicated efforts by many health workers in the affected countries. A lot of them helped others despite their personal losses. While WHO will continue to report on health situation in the affected areas, we also see the importance to record the experience of health personnel who had made a difference during the emergency.

Our video teams travelled to five affected countries to record these interviews. They spoke with health workers and health managers. They also spoke with some of the victims of the tragedy. The CD-ROM also includes a selection of WHO technical guidelines on a number of subjects. We would now like to bring a small excerpt from the CD-ROM.

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR PUBLICATIONS

WHO has provided technical publications and guidelines to all Member Countries for their immediate use during emergency. Now, a year after the Tsunami, we have brought together more key information on some of these areas, so that these documents are updated and readily available for more effective use in future. I am happy to launch today a new set of publications and guidelines.

3. INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLICATION ON COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

The Tsunami brought unprecedented devastation and untold misery, not only to the six affected countries, but also stunned the whole South-East Asia Region. Moreover, those who survived the devastation had to live in make-shift shelters under overcrowded conditions. They confronted the risk of communicable diseases, such as diarrhoea, respiratory infections and vector-borne diseases.

This publication, entitled “Responding to Communicable Diseases following the Tsunami in South-East Asia” captures the work done by the affected countries and WHO in putting in place emergency disease surveillance and early warning systems and in building health system capacity to prevent and control communicable disease outbreaks.

The ten chapters describe the health impact of the Tsunami, planning response to Communicable Diseases in WHO and in the countries; and the success stories, the lessons learnt, and how to apply this knowledge for future planning. The publication also includes a chapter on experiences of those who supported countries in planning and in providing essential health services. In addition, the publication contains country reports highlighting country-specific experiences.

Finally, the publication documents how the remarkable work done by public health professionals, both national as well as international, averted any major outbreaks of disease. This is indeed a testimony of what can be achieved if we work together in a coordinated and complementary manner.

4. INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLICATION ON ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Water and Sanitation are critical in any emergency situation. Safe drinking water and adequate sanitation facilities will protect people, and enhance their feeling of well-being. The Tsunami destroyed many water systems and also contaminated water wells. It left behind a lot of debris and waste, including some hazardous waste.

The publication on Environmental Health describes WHO's efforts in this area over the last one year. It provides important lessons to be followed during the next phases of rehabilitation and reconstruction. It is easier to rehabilitate a sector that is normally strong and is functioning well. But, it is much more difficult to revive a poorly-funded and weak infrastructure, such as in the water and sanitation sector. However, it has been observed that the well-established mechanisms for sectoral coordination have proved to be more efficient during an emergency.

The water and sanitation sector did fairly well in most parts after the Tsunami. And the majority of survivors were provided with safe drinking water quickly. In the coming years, WHO will actively assist countries to better prepare for emergency response in the area of water and sanitation.

A precondition for successful capacity building in this area will be to further strengthen the relevant national institutions; to support improvement in water quality management through the implementation of 'local' water safety plans, and to ensure access to adequate sanitation facilities and the management of waste water. When these conditions are largely met, countries will be better prepared for emergency in future.

5. INTRODUCTION TO THE PUBLICATIONS ON MENTAL HEALTH

The mental health and psychosocial needs of the affected population emerged as a major concern after the Tsunami. To some extent, each and every person in the devastated areas was psychologically affected. The magnitude of psychological problems in the disaster-affected population could be as large as the size of the population.

It was recognized that any neglect of psychosocial support could impair efforts in physical rehabilitation. Providing this service to communities affected by the Tsunami was a key component of WHO's short-medium-and long-term strategy. Such support was crucial, but to be effective, the support had to be socially and culturally sensitive.

To back up the community-level action, affected countries took immediate steps to enhance their mental health services. One of the important recommendations of WHO is to have a strong community mental health system which would serve the immediate as well as long-term needs of the community. The system must be sustainable and should become a part of routine health care services.

This publication compiles experiences from the five most-affected countries in the South-East Asia Region. It provides valuable insights on how best to meet the mental health and psychosocial needs of disaster-affected communities. There are many lessons from this experience which should help us to be better prepared for any future disasters.

6. INTRODUCTION TO THE MEDIA STUDY

The Tsunami received extensive media coverage, not only in South-East Asia but also globally. No other natural calamity had figured as prominently in prime time news and television coverage.

WHO commissioned a media study to review the coverage of health issues in the media during the first three months after the Tsunami. The primary objective of the study was to draw lessons from the coverage so that communication of health issues could be improved in future emergency situations.

Among the broad findings of the study, the health issues did not receive as prominent a place as the larger spectrum of death, devastation, and relief-related coverage.

I am sure, other elements in the study report will be worth reading by whosoever dealing with emergencies.