

Challenges

Marvin L. Birnbaum, MD, PhD

History shows that most of the positive or beneficial developments in human society have occurred as the result of care and compassion.

Dalai Lama
The Times, June 1999

This theme issue of *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* is a hallmark as it brings to the forefront important issues that must be addressed by humanitarian organizations in order to progress and enhance the effectiveness of their all-important interventions. Such interventions are essential elements required for the appropriate relief and recovery of populations stricken following catastrophic events and other emergencies. Often, these agencies provide unheralded support as their missions begin after everyone else leaves. The media is gone, but the work continues. The contributions of the humanitarian agencies remain relatively unknown to all except to those of us who are involved and understand their importance. Their contributions often make relief and recovery possible and in turn, they may save more lives and prevent more morbidity than occurs during the life-saving sub-phase of humanitarian phase of disaster responses. The humanitarian organizations and their personnel deserve much more respect than they are awarded. It is impossible to imagine what disaster health would be without their contributions.

The organizers of the First Annual Humanitarian Health Conference upon which this theme issue of PDM is based must be congratulated for recognizing that despite good intentions of the humanitarian community, there are many issues that must be resolved in order to enhance the effectiveness of their missions. Two major universities and other leaders collaborated to convene the conference that involved many of the important actors in the area. Together, the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative and the Dartmouth Medical School assembled a noted group of discussants to deliberate on the issues, present and future. Moreover, it is noted that this first effort will be ongoing; these discussions are to continue on an annual basis. Such discourse is and will be a major contribution to future disaster responses during both the life-saving and relief phase

and the recovery phase of disasters. And, the discussants were excellently chosen for the task at hand. As you review the contents of this issue, you quickly will recognize the relevance of such discourse.

This theme issue never would have come to fruition without the vision of Gregg Greenough, who believed that the discussions should have a much broader audience than just those in attendance. He volunteered to bring the proceedings to PDM—not just abstracts, but as papers that addressed the issues raised. Greenough and Sharon McDonnell agreed to edit the papers and to assist the discussants in the preparation of their respective manuscripts—a daunting task, indeed. We are grateful to each of the authors who volunteered their time and expertise to develop the manuscripts. They have prepared excellent, scholarly papers that squarely address specific issues. Together, these papers present a miraculous overview of the issues involved from an on-the-ground perspective and with a look into the future, they postulate possible solutions and directions. The materials are presented in a manner that should serve as a model for similar conferences. Without a published end-product, such as the papers in this issue of PDM, the results of the conference are lost and do not contribute significantly to the science. However, the papers in this issue of PDM will help ensure the progress made during the First Annual Humanitarian Health Conference. They will shape the activities of the humanitarian community and garner the appreciation of those interested but not directly involved.

We all owe the organizers and the Editors a debt of gratitude for initiating a model process for progress in this important field of health. Now, we must integrate this model into our future conferences and congresses. Thank you to all who have contributed.

Enjoy and learn from this excellent example. This is one way to enhance our science and understanding.

Many ideas grow better when transplanted into another mind than in the one where they sprang up.

Oliver Wendell Holmes
in Bowen, *Yankee from Olympus*, 1945