

SPECIAL ARTICLE**Crisis management in the Health Sector; Qualities and characteristics of health crisis managers****Efstathiou Panos, MD, MSc, PhD,**

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Abstract: The rapidly evolving nature of today's health systems and the need to adapt to modern demands, require that these systems are staffed with skilled health crisis managers. Based on that scenario, crisis managers with good knowledge and training, adequate experience, as well as virtues of excellent organizational skills, operational planning, mental power and social sensitivity, can play a key role in dealing successfully with crises in the health sector.

Key words: crisis manager, health systems, operational planning, health crisis

Introduction

The dynamic nature of the health field, international and regional advancements in the health sector, growing populations as well as potential health threats either predicted or not, are conditions that point out the necessity to organize health systems towards health crisis management. When we speak of health crisis management, we imply that a coordinated and effective operational action plan of certain groups of people exists, and is implemented in case of imposed threat on civilians' health and health systems, regardless of cause and extent (Efstathiou

2008). Human factor plays a major role when it comes to organizing health crisis management. The cornerstone of a preparedness system is the personality of the manager. There are qualities and characteristics that define the effectiveness and success of a management system that deals with crises in the health sector.

Discussion***Before the crisis***

It is important for health crisis managers to come from or be familiar with the health sector, something

that makes them aware of all relevant areas of involvement and their particular features (Efstathiou 2008). Familiarity with the health field, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as its principles of function, makes the manager capable of adapting to the nature of the crisis. Basic prerequisite is an established presence in the healthcare field, accompanied by adequate experience. Since human life and individual health are primarily involved, medical training of the manager can be an asset. Nevertheless, crisis management competencies can be applied to a wide range of health professionals who are expected to perform at different levels, according to experience, professional role, level of education, or job function (Subbarao, Lyznicki & Hsu 2008).

The crisis manager trains and prepares the members of the crisis management team. Within that framework, it is essential for the manager to clarify and define the roles and responsibilities, to demonstrate fair judgment, to show respect, and to acknowledge and reinforce achievements and positive behaviors respectively. On the other hand, the manager is obligated to impose discipline, point out errors and perform constructive criticism to team members. All the above, help the manager establish strong leadership of the team and gain wide acceptance by co-workers on an everyday basis. Bice and Brown indicate that the commander of the team is responsible for the development of the action plan that contains goals and strategies for crisis management (Bice & Brown 2008). Proper planning and guidance, sound and frequent evaluation of the staff, are virtues of the manager that define the effectiveness of an action plan at times of crisis.

The manager of a health crisis must be constantly updated on international and national processes that may affect health. Operational planning is challenged at times of crisis. Proper strategic planning not only requires continuous monitoring of events, but also evaluation, improvement and revision of the operational plan, when needed (Efstathiou 2008). To be able to organize a thorough preparedness plan, one needs to know and understand possible health threats and conflicts. McConnell and Drennan point out that contingency planning requires ordering and coherence of possible threats, yet crisis is not amenable to being packaged in such a predictable way (McConnell & Drennan 2006). Major fields of knowledge for a successful health crisis manager are Public Health, chemical, biological, radiological and nuclear threats, natural and manmade disasters and their humanitarian approach, and the dynamics of the emergency medical system. It is necessary for the manager to participate actively in the decision making process, regarding operational planning, cooperation with other nations in crisis management and readiness to respond to major challenges and possible health threats.

Knowledgeable crisis manager is also capable of remaining vigilant of any possible involvement in crisis that may have impact beyond his territory. For the sake of global health security and good neighboring policy, the crisis manager must handle any such events in a timely and effective manner. Knowledge of foreign languages and familiarity with information technology systems are essential characteristics of a health crisis manager. In accordance with the above, staff members of the Hellenic National Health Operations Center (NaHOC) monitor European information systems, such as the Early Warning Response System and the Rapid Alert System for Biological and Chemical Agent Attacks on a daily basis, and assume all necessary actions for the protection of public health, when needed (Efstathiou 2008). Also, it is important for the crisis manager to maintain intact public relations, something that facilitates the implementation of the operational plan in case of crisis and the communication with all involved agencies.

Based on principles of operational alertness, NaHOC was the first to provide humanitarian assistance to Albania after the catastrophic explosion that occurred in a military warehouse outside Tirana in March 2008. Medical and paramedical staff, specially trained in handling health crises, was responsible for the delivery of medical supplies and the provision of specialized medical care to severely injured Albanian citizens, who were transferred to Greek healthcare facilities and were hospitalized until full recovery (Efstathiou 2008).

During the health crisis

During rapid evolution of a health crisis, the manager must assess the seriousness of the events and prioritize upcoming needs. Common goal is securing the health of the population. Nevertheless, health threats vary in nature and effect, so proper handling of a health crisis demands a balanced distribution of resources. The approach of the health crisis manager has to be meticulous, his thought has to be algorithmic, decisions and actions have to be coordinated and expectations have to be realistic. With proper preparedness and planning, the crisis manager is capable of standing on top of the situation and dealing with the challenges effectively. Flexibility, avoidance of dogmatism, adaptability to the circumstances and rapid decisional capacity are fundamental qualities of health crisis managers. Several times, health crises are quite complex regardless of cause; whether they refer to natural disasters, communicable diseases, accidents or everyday conflicts that relate to the function of the health system.

The manager needs to demonstrate ability to decide and act without revealing emotional tension that may be related to the events. He needs to have psychological stability and balance that will inspire his team, so that any plans and actions will be based primarily on rational and analytical thought process.

During the August 2008 Peloponnese forest fires in Greece, the health crisis managers of NaHOC implemented a crisis management plan with success. The fires were one of the greatest natural disasters Greece ever dealt with, but due to appropriate planning and readiness, the health system responded efficiently to the enormous challenge (Efstathiou et al 2008).

The social and humanitarian role of the manager

Health crisis management involves the most important human value. Health crises may stigmatize human lives for long and have a variable social impact. In these terms, the crisis manager needs to be extremely careful and considerate when communicating with the public. The manager's actions must imply social sensitivity and interest, based on the needs of the society and the people. As Garfield states, it is important to assess the level of need among affected populations and be able to monitor assistance, define humanitarian needs, and approach equity in the distribution of assistance (Garfield 2007). Additionally, decisions must take into account the human factor, without emotional involvement with human suffering and loss. The health crisis manager must be the leader at times of crisis and assume responsible actions towards individuals and the public. Also, special effort has to be made to avoid disclosure of sensitive personal data, maintain confidentiality and protect human privacy, as much as possible.

Conclusions

Today's societies need persons trained in crisis management that will staff healthcare systems and will be able to manage health crises, when needed. They will be devoted to principles of prevention and constant alertness and will show excellent organizational skills. Basic features are established

presence in the healthcare field, adequate experience, leadership, education and ability to adjust operational plans, depending on needs. Additionally, flexibility, rationalism and social sensibility are needed (Efstathiou 2008). Especially for those who belong to the medical field, health crisis management must be an inextricable part of their education and training that will allow charismatic personalities to evolve into future successful managers of health crises.

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