

# The Awakening!!!

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*The saying is true, "The empty vessel makes the greatest sound".*

Shakespear, Henry V, Act iv, sc 4  
*Magnus sibi ipse non facit finem dolor*  
 (Great grief does not of itself put an end to itself)  
 Seneca, *Troades*, 1, 786

Bam . . . . Bam . . . . Bam . . . . Bam!!!! Four events occurring in less than one hour on 11 September 2001, awakened part of the world that was mired in complacency. Why and to whom were these four events so confounding? What part of the world reacted? Was the perception about the impact of the events the same for the disaster relief worker assisting a downtrodden population to recover from its disaster the same as it was for those of us living in a highly "developed" society? These events did not teach us about man's inhumanity to man. What was realized is that we all are vulnerable; our very being is threatened by those whose views differ from our own and who have little respect for their fellow human beings. Human-conceived disasters<sup>1</sup> are not a new phenomenon. History repeats and repeats; all that changes is the methods selected.

Why then are these events attracting so much attention, when events that result in the destruction of great numbers of humans are an everyday occurrence in some parts of the world? This issue of PDM focuses on complex emergencies that result in human tolls exponentially greater than did the events of 9-11. What proportion of the population living in the developed world even is aware of the daily tolls that result during complex emergencies? The damage associated with complex emergencies seems of little consequence to those of us who perceive our risk for such catastrophe to be almost non-existent. The media we depend upon for our information in this shrinking world pay little attention to such events. They focus only on events of sudden onset, and usually disappear before the real disasters from the event occur. Those of us who are aware that such events are almost a daily occurrence in some parts of the world have been unable to awaken those who believe that they personally are at little risk for such an event. Societies with perceptions that they are at little risk are complacent, and therefore, invest little of their resources toward attenuation of the suffering that many of the citizens of this world experience from ongoing disasters.

What did happen on 9-11, and the anthrax scares that followed, is that those who perceived themselves to be at

little or no risk and without vulnerability, suddenly became acutely aware that we all are vulnerable. People from more than 60 countries lost their lives in the events of 9-11. The anthrax scares further accented the reality that we all are vulnerable. Our world did change, but did it change irreversibly? Or, with the passage of time, will we revert to our previous levels of complacency? Has this retreat into complacency already begun?

Clearly, when populations recognize and appreciate their vulnerability, they are willing to invest resources in mechanisms to decrease their vulnerability. They are willing to absorb the opportunity costs associated with decreasing their respective vulnerabilities, and generally, they are willing to do so as long as they perceive their vulnerability merits attention. And thus, suddenly, resources have become directed towards those who practice disaster and/or emergency medicine as we are part of the mechanisms that can implement vulnerability mitigating measures. Their recognition of vulnerability opens a window of opportunity; it provides an ability to gather some of these resources to do "our thing". But, the window remains open only as long as the affected societies recognize and appreciate their vulnerability. As complacency returns, the window slams shut.

I am not making light of the tragedies of 9-11 and of what followed; I am suggesting that now is a time when almost the whole world recognizes it is at risk. It is a time for us to acquire and apply some of the resources that heretofore have been difficult to obtain. Some of the non-governmental organizations and foundations currently are receiving the attention they deserve for their efforts to decrease the vulnerabilities of the citizens of the world. But, how long will the media continue to pay attention, even though the needs and the work go on?

Since the time is right, and as long as the window remains open, we can gain access to resources otherwise not available for application to disaster medicine. Although the bulk of these resources is being directed specifically at terrorism, the needs are much greater than are those required to address terrorist-generated catastrophes. We must become creative not only in obtaining the resources, but in how we use them. We must obtain resources for those aspects of disaster medicine that will decrease the risks and enhance the absorbing capacities of societies for all kinds of disasters, while at the same time giving enough attention to those aspects of disaster medicine associated

with terrorists and their activities. This is a time of increased opportunity, and we must seize it. We are the conscience of our respective societies, and we must act while the window is open.

There does exist a substantial danger: when resources suddenly become abundant, often we use them to satisfy our "wish list". The danger associated with transiently available abundant resources is that programs initiated with the use of such resources tend to disappear when the resources disappear. Great care must be taken to invest such resources only into programs that will continue long after the supplemental resources disappear. Resources only should be invested into those programs that will be SUSTAINABLE.

Non-sustainable programs are a waste of resources.

We share the sadness, the grief, and the fear of those directly and indirectly affected by the heinous events of 9-11 and beyond. We have the ability to demonstrate and apply our expertise. We must use this window of opportunity with great care, and we must do all that we can to prevent the return of complacency. Now is not the time to sit passively by and later complain that we cannot obtain the resources we need. We must use the tragedy to decrease the vulnerability of our fellow humans and our environment using whatever it takes. Let this be a legacy of 9-11.

*Occasio aegre offertur, facile amittitur*  
(A good opportunity is seldom presented, and is easily lost.)  
Publilius Syrus, *Senientiae*

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1. Personal communication with SWA Gunn, 22 February 2002.
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