

Management of Dead Bodies in Disaster Situations

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Area on Emergency Preparedness
and Disaster Relief



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FOREWORD

Our Region has been the victim of different types of disasters that have had significant, long-term consequences for the development of communities, intensifying the poverty and increasing obstacles to progress, particularly among populations with scarce economic resources.

Death does not end human suffering, especially when death is sudden, as the result of a disaster. The death of a loved one leaves an indelible mark on the survivors, and unfortunately, because of the lack of information, the families of the deceased suffer additional harm because of the inadequate way that the bodies of the dead are handled. These secondary injuries are unacceptable, particularly if they are the consequence of direct authorization or action on the part of the authorities or those responsible for humanitarian assistance.

Regrettably, we continue to be witness to the use of common graves and mass cremations for the rapid disposal of dead bodies owing to the myths and beliefs that corpses pose a high risk for epidemics. The most serious aspect is that these measures are carried out without respecting identification processes or preserving the individuality of the deceased. Not only do these actions go against the cultural and religious practices of a population, but they have social, psychological, emotional, economic, and legal repercussions regarding the legacy of the deceased, which exacerbate the damage caused by the disaster.

The State has a critical role in standardizing and guiding the tasks of handling dead bodies (recovery, identification, transfer, and final disposal), ensuring that legal norms are followed, and guaranteeing that the dignity of the deceased and their families is respected in accordance with their cultural values and religious beliefs.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) is pleased to present this manual, which will be very useful for authorities and those responsible for disaster prevention and response. It is our goal to ensure that the management of massive fatalities forms part of disaster preparedness and response plans, and that it is a fundamental aspect of humanitarian assistance to survivors and rehabilitation and reconstruction programs. In this way we can preserve the memory and dignity of those who have passed before us.

Mirta Roses Periago
Director
Pan American Health Organization



INTRODUCTION

“We should treat the dead with respect. In death, money doesn't matter; material possessions don't matter; dignity is what we should care about.”—statement by Gung Tresna, Lifeguard at Kuta Beach following the terrorist attack in Bali, Indonesia.

Major disasters occurring in this Region, regardless of their origin, have had one thing in common: an enormous number of fatalities. Hurricane Mitch in Central America, floods in Venezuela, the earthquake in El Salvador, hurricanes in the Caribbean, and disasters of human origin—such as the Mesa Redonda fire in Lima, wars, or aviation accidents, to name a few—have resulted in many deaths. Each disaster has yielded important evidence about handling bodies, particularly when the number of dead overwhelms the capacity of a country to effectively respond to an emergency.

Immediately following the onset of a disaster, it is essential for national, regional, or local authorities to concentrate their actions and resources on three basic activities: first, the rescue and treatment of survivors; second, the repair and maintenance of basic services; and, finally, the recovery and management of bodies.

Controversy has always surrounded the handling of mass fatalities. Myths about treatment of the dead are strongly rooted in culture. Contemplating massive measles vaccination campaigns after an earthquake because of the fear that corpses could transmit this disease, or burying or incinerating corpses without completing required identification processes because of the supposed contamination risk they pose, are just two examples of the myths that form part of the popular culture. Despite efforts by experts to dispel these and other beliefs, certain fallacies have led and continue to lead to unacceptable practices in managing dead bodies. For example, after the earthquake in India in 2001, in which the number of fatalities approached 100,000, the bodies recovered were cremated. The wood supply was quickly exhausted, leaving the survivors without enough fuel for cooking or heating.¹

Considering these factors, PAHO's Area on Emergency Preparedness and Disaster Relief has developed this manual as a tool to be used by national and local authorities and professionals from public institutions that are affected by this issue.

This manual provides the technical information that will support the correct approach to handling dead bodies, taking into account the following principles:

- ◆ When death is the result of a disaster, the body does not pose a risk for infection;
- ◆ Victims should never be buried in common graves;
- ◆ Mass cremation of bodies should never take place when this goes against the cultural and religious norms of the population;

1 de Ville de Goyet. “Stop propagating disaster myths”. *Lancet* 2000; 356:762-4.

- ◆ Every effort must be taken to identify the bodies. As a last resort, unidentified bodies should be placed in individual niches or trenches, which is a basic human right of the surviving family members.

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