

# Humanitarianism

Marvin L. Birnbaum, MD, PhD

**humanitarian**—1. a person who seeks to promote human welfare; a person who advocates or practices humane action; a philanthropist; relating to or holding the views of humanitarians; 2. of or relating to human welfare.

*Oxford dictionary*

Well, *it* struck me again. This time at the 10th World Congress for Emergency and Disaster Medicine convened in Mainz, Germany in September 1997. It was not only the superb organization and conduct of the Congress that was so impressive, but what was so profound was the character of the more than 1,200 persons who participated in the Congress.

I have noted before my impressions of the special persons (physicians, nurses, emergency medical technicians, engineers, representatives from humanitarian organizations including the World Health Organization and the Red Cross /Crescent Societies as well as governmental and non-governmental organizations) who have committed themselves to the relief of masses of persons involved in natural and human-made disasters and complex human emergencies. But, this Congress was special and the participants were remarkable.

My awareness also peaked at the Congresses conducted in Montreal, Stockholm, and Israel. It happened in Budapest. It happened repeatedly in the working group and conferences associated with the development of the Template in Gothenberg. And, it will happen again in San Jose and in Osaka. It happens every time I come in contact with these special people—this feeling of awe at the closeness, caring, openness, and friendship that pervades the entire experience. Many of these special people I hardly know, yet, I always come away from these contacts feeling refreshed and renewed.

But, what is *it* that so specially separates these persons from others with whom we interact? What is *it* that makes disaster workers such special people—these persons who devote a major part of their life to the medical responses for those stricken by an

unfortunate set of circumstances far beyond their own control (whether it be a disaster or multicasualty event, a complex human emergency)? Certainly, they fit the definition of humanitarians. But why do they worry and plan and commit themselves to helping and caring for those victims of a circumstance that was beyond their control? There is no pecuniary advantage; it is not something they *must* do only because it is a function of their job. There are no external awards: no medals, no recognition. Often, they place themselves at peril for the good of others. Yet, they accomplish their respective missions and quietly go home. What is *it* that drives them?

By most standards, their's is a peculiar psychology. *It* unites persons from every corner of the globe. *It* cements relationships between persons of profoundly different cultures. *It* engenders respect for each other regardless of their culture, background, or language. *It* manifests in the excitement one feels in seeing and being with each other. *It* is the thread that binds us and the world together. Where *it* is absent, there is chaos—where *it* is present, chaos melts into caring.

Each time I see these people and how they interact, I become acutely aware of *it* despite my ongoing, almost daily contact with some. I struggled trying to define "it" following the working meetings in Gothenberg—that unique environment I described earlier this year (Volume 12, number 2). Following the extraordinary experience in Mainz and after discussing the *it* with my wife and with our Editorial Assistant, Donna Schaan (who experienced "it" for the first time as it was her initial direct experience with these people), it struck me that "it" is *humanitarianism*. It is the suffix, *ism*, that makes the difference.

The psychology that goes with humanitarianism unites these persons. It pervades all of the interactions that occur when these persons come together. This wonderful sense is present in this world filled with turmoil, misunderstandings, disrespect, jealousy, and the inhumane treatment of fellow human beings. It is a marker and an example of how the world could and should be. After all, *humanitarianism* is the very heart and soul of medicine, and it remains alive and well in Disaster Medicine.

If you no longer experience such warmth and friendship in your life or in your work, perhaps you should come along with us. Experience it at the 1st Pan-American Congress on Disaster and Emergency Medicine in San Jose, Costa Rica (2–5 March 1998) or the 11th World Congress in Osaka in 1999. You will have no regrets, for these persons are the most sensitive, caring persons I ever have known.

**Humanitarianism**—*That quality of a human being that is committed to the caring for humanity especially as manifested in those who have become victims of circumstances beyond their control; the personal quality of a true humanitarian. 2) that quality of caring about humanity and its state of being; an essential element for peace.*

#### The Fred C. Cuny Memorial Series

The continuing education series that is introduced in this issue of *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* bears the title, *The Fred C. Cuny Memorial Series* as a testimony to its author. It addresses Disaster Management and consists of 15 lessons, one of which will be included for your continuing education in each subsequent issue beginning with Volume 13, Number 1 (January–March 1998). The series has been dedicated to the memory of a true pioneer in the new field of Disaster Management who met a tragic death while attempting to work another bit of magic during the conflict in Chechnya.

Fred, along with Don Schramm, developed the concept that has promulgated the development of the Disaster Management Center at the University of Wisconsin. He and his colleagues Paul Thompson and Eddie Perez with the support of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) developed a series of

courses to assist in the education of Disaster Managers. Enrollment in these courses leads to a *Certificate in Disaster Management*. Two of these courses already have been published in this Journal (Volumes 5–10). Each of the previous offerings has been enthusiastically endorsed by the readers and hence, this course will be the third in an ongoing series on disasters and their management. The courses can be matriculated by completing the form included with the introductory material in this issue, or one that is provided following each lesson and forwarding to the Center by mail or by accessing the Center's Homepage (<http://epdwww.engr.wisc.edu/dmc>).

The development of these materials was only a small part of the contributions of Fred Cuny to the development of our field. Fred precipitated to disasters in all corners of the globe. In each of these instances, he provided a unique form of leadership. In each of these settings, his observations and actions modified our subsequent approaches to many of the problems inherent in disasters. He modified our definition of the disaster from the precipitating event (whether acute or chronic in onset) to the disruption in the infrastructure that resulted from the insult. This constituted a new way of approaching the problems associated with disaster. He was a master at mustering and organizing the resources required for the relief of those impacted by the disaster. He was able to enlist the support of both governmental and non-governmental organizations to provide the real resources required to meet the actual needs of the affected population.

Fred was able to show us a way when it appeared there was none. He not only told us how it could be done, but actually led the way. His contributions to our field have been immense and through this series and those to follow, he will continue to exert his influence on how to bring all of the factions and resources together to meet the needs of the unfortunate victims of these insults. He recognized the barriers and was able either to remove them or to circumvent them. He was one of the great leaders in trying to bring this world together in peace.

It is for these reasons that we dedicate this important series on Disaster Management as a memorial to all that he has contributed. In this way, his influence continues to affect each of us in the fields of Disaster Prevention, Mitigation, Response and Management.