

Long-term Impacts of Disasters – Implications for European Public Health Systems

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Margit Raich is Assistant Professor at UMIT, a Private University for Health Sciences Medical Informatics and Technology in Hall, Austria. Before, she was working more than 10 years at the Department of Strategic Management, Marketing and Tourism, University of Innsbruck, where she did her doctoral studies in the field of leadership. Her major research areas are health services leadership and management with focus on qualitative research methods. Since summer 2013 she is principal investigator for the project PsyCris (PSYcho-social Support in CRISIS Management) in Austria. It is an international multi-disciplinary project funded by the European Union with the overall objective to improve psycho-social support in crisis management

Context

For European countries it is essential to collect information about long-term effects of disasters (e.g., flood, terror attack) on the public health system in order to answer in an adequate way to the needs of the people affected. The objective of this study is to identify long-term impacts on public health systems by analysing five selected European case studies. The study is part of the international multi-disciplinary project PsyCris (PSYcho-social Support in CRISIS Management) that is funded by the European Union with the overall objective to improve psycho-social support in crisis management.

Methods

A case study approach was chosen for the identification of long-term impacts. Five different European disasters served as base for the data collection. The disasters happened at least 10 years ago in order to measure long-term impacts. Based on the results of the literature review, the research team developed a questionnaire that served as assessment tool for the chosen disasters. The collected information consists of existing studies, reports and other sources (e.g., photos, interviews, film documentations). Additionally, interviews with stakeholders who have participated at the disaster provided the research team with further insights concerning the long-term effects of the disasters.

Results

Many long-term impact variables were identified in conjunction with different time frames. The impact variables and time frames strongly depend on the nature and extent of the disaster, affected people, existing infrastructure etc. The identified long-term impacts are the result of the collected experiences and reflective analysis of operations and results from each disaster (e.g., which implications can be drawn because of operations that lead to the adaptation of emergency plans, communication structures, laws, infrastructure, etc.). The detailed analysis of each case study has shown, that new structural, procedural, and legal concepts have been developed and implemented in elements of public health systems.

Discussion

Our chosen holistic approach gave deep insights into each case study. Especially the understanding about undertaken or missing reactions supported the process in identifying long-term impacts. Many identified long-term impacts on health care systems are the result of a learning process because of inadequate outputs in the past. Each disaster is characterized by event specific conditions, pre-impact conditions, the existing physical and social vulnerability of the people affected and the standard of the emergency system. The public health care has to react differently, depending on the recovery needs of the people affected. Based on the learning experiences of each disaster we are able to evaluate key strategies and measures from a public health care system perspective.

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