
The 2004 Boxing Day tsunami – Policy, planning and deployment

Colonel Vlas Efstathis OAM^{1,2,3} and Professor John Pearn⁴

St John Ambulance¹, QLD 2004 Tsunami Emergency Response Team², Ipswich Health³,
Royal Life Saving Society – Australia⁴

On 26 December 2004, a massive submarine earthquake disrupted the sea floor west of the north-western tip of Sumatra. The resulting tsunami raced centrifugally from its epicentre, lensed about the tip of Sumatra and planed clean one-third of the littoral city of Banda Aceh, a major Indonesian metropolis of more than 300,000 people. In addition to the kinetic destruction of the wave, another third of Banda Aceh was inundated by a surging flood. More than 90,000 lives were lost in the city over a period as short as 30 minutes.

More than 30 international medical teams, both civilian and military, were deployed to the stricken city. The Queensland Government raised an emergency team led by one of us (VE), with another as the intensivist and physician (JP). This paper discussed policy development, planning for the medical role, deployment and the experience of living in and serving a devastated city with its municipal and medical infrastructure destroyed.

A particular challenge was the tasking of the emergency response team, and formal delineation of roles. To raise a balanced team required emergency decisions about matching skills with the anticipated tasks. Deployment of personnel necessitated attention to such factors as preventive medicine, matching compatible personalities who need work under prolonged stressful conditions and managing the disappointment of those not chosen to be deployed. In addition to the technical aspects of clinical medicine, issues of both prior immunization and physical fitness were important. In-country success of the mission depended on the co-ordination of resources supplied by supporting national contingents, both military and civilian, with whom all emergency responders had to work.

Corresponding Author

Colonel Vlas Efstathis
Medical Officer Ipswich Health
Chair St John Ambulance – Queensland
Former Team Leader QLD 2004 Tsunami Emergency Response Team
The East Clinic
17 Roderick Street
Ipswich QLD Australia 4305
Email: vlasroam@internode.on.net
Telephone: +61 7 3281 0888