

## EXPLORING THE VIEWS OF DISASTER RESPONDERS TOWARD A UNIFORM CODE OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

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### ABSTRACT

The majority of disaster management research deals with clinical outcomes. Instead, the focus here is more narrowly on the ethics of disaster response. A proposed model of ethics that transcends business and professional ethics so that any responder or manager of a disaster can rely upon these principles to make good, defensible moral judgment in the response to disaster is tested for validity. Multiple stake-holders in the management of disasters are queried about their beliefs about the uniform code of professional ethics.

**Key words: disaster, disaster management, ethics, special ethics, medical ethics**

### INTRODUCTION

Disasters and how agencies respond to them seemed to have gained the increased attention of the common media in the recent years. Unfortunately, much of the coverage focuses on the apparent failures of the responding agencies. One aspect of a response that has received little attention is the ethical perspective. Recognizing this lack of such a view, the journal *Emergency Medicine Clinics of North America* devoted a special issue to the ethics in emergency situations. The guest editors, Dr. Raquel Schears, MD and Dr. Catherine Marco, MD stated that there is a need “to expand our awareness of sensitive issues, to be more thorough in moral assessments (p. xvii-xviii)” surrounding emergency crises (Schears & Marco, 2006). The attainment of these goals is ultimately to provide a better set of answers for why disaster responders and managers make the decisions they do, not just to provide those specifically in the medical field with rationales to explain and support their decisions.

However, in comparison to the plethora of research related to analytical models upon which to base triage and the distribution of scarce resource decisions in the planning and execution of relief efforts, one element of planning and execution that has been only lightly touched upon is the question of the ethics of the totality of disaster management efforts. The one notable exception is by Dean and Payne (2011). They provide a uniform code of ethics synthesized from disparate frameworks and tangentially related codes of ethics. This research attempts to validate Dean and Payne's proposed code of ethics by surveying practitioners involved in the response to various types of disasters. This paper discusses their proposed framework and the preliminary stages of the research being conducted in an attempt to substantiate it.

### **DISASTER MANAGEMENT CODES OF ETHICS**

Few organized codes of ethics for disaster responders and managers exist, although each set of professionals within the field of disaster management have an abundance of codes and protocols upon which they may rely and may be required to use as arbiters of their behaviors. The efforts of Larkin and Arnold, directed primarily at health care providers, however, may be adapted for use by all disaster management professionals (Larkin & Arnold, 2003). They proposed seven cardinal virtues to be used in the disaster management decision-making process as it relates to terrorism: prudence, courage, justice, stewardship, vigilance, resilience, and charity. Prudence is described as practical wisdom and connotes discernment, perspicacity, judiciousness and proper discrimination (Larkin & Arnold, 2003). It reflects professional competency and is inherent in the development of trust and respect among stakeholders. Courage is fortitude; it is acceptance of danger. Larkin and Arnold cite Aristotle's definition that courage is the average of foolishness and cowardice. Finally, they suggest that it is the embrace of the duty to care without being overly concerned about one's own risk. Justice is defined as fairness and equity, also key to the establishment of trust among stakeholders. The fourth virtue considered is stewardship, defined as the appropriate management of someone else's property or affairs, in this case, someone's health and wellbeing. Vigilance is the fifth virtue; this requires constant preparation and awareness of others and their needs, as well as an acceptance that excellence in performance is required. Resiliency is defined with very specific regard to terrorist-created disasters: it is "sustained competence under stress and prevents disillusionment when working in the midst of lawless terrorists who follow neither codes of ethics nor the Geneva Convention" (Larkin & Arnold, 2003). The final virtue is charity, one of the most noble. It denotes effacement of self-interest, humility, generosity of self and self-sacrifice that exceeds that expected under the social contract theory. These virtues have as their principles many ideals that have in fact been identified as valuable in other ethical schemas.

Dean and Payne (2011) attempt to align the basic principles found in various workable codes of ethics, stemming from both business and disaster management. Their development of a system of uniform codal provisions not only coincides with the basic principles of business ethics, but also facilitates the understanding and better use of precepts of the existing codes of ethics espoused by various professional societies of disaster responders and managers. It can also be used to

enlighten the public as to their rights and build their confidence in disaster management, an end that is imperative in this world of heightened real concern about the number, severity and life cycle of disasters.

Table 1 from Dean and Payne (2011) provides a mapping of the concepts derived from the synthesized frameworks and consolidated as principles to the proposed uniform professional code of ethics. This proposed code serves a variety of purposes. First, it presents the essential principles to be found in a number of codes and with which, importantly, our society is familiar. Such familiarity, rather than breeding contempt, should bring understanding and a greater level of trust. Second, it helps remove ambiguity among professionals, whether they are business people or disaster management professionals, or both. Better understanding and confidence can be established more easily via a common foundation of basic principles of ethics. Finally, the profession of disaster management itself is benefited: the reduction of the number of diverse codes of disaster management ethics can only be beneficial to the progression of the all of the professions associated with disaster management.

**Table 1: Mapping of Principles Derived from Synthesized Frameworks to the Proposed Code of Professional Ethics**

<i>Concepts Derived from Synthesized Frameworks and Consolidated as Principle</i>	<b>Proposed Uniform Code of Professional Ethics</b>
<i>Consistency</i>	Treat constituents fairly, with uniformity in consistent situations, regarding safety, knowledge and good faith
<i>Respect for individuals</i>	
<i>Autonomy for all</i>	Assure freedom of choice by providing information that is accurate, relevant and complete to all appropriate stakeholders
<i>Integrity</i>	Use good faith in decision making and assessment activities
<i>Justice/Fairness</i>	
<i>Truthfulness</i>	
<i>Openness</i>	
<i>Utility</i>	Assess utility and competence of project and self in light of the social and individual needs and abilities of stakeholders and society
<i>Competence</i>	

## **CURRENT PROGRESS**

The current research involves determining how incident commanders, the decision makers of the involved agencies, and first responders view the proposed code presented in Table 1. The general questions we are attempting to answer include: Do they agree with the main concepts? Is the code “workable” for first responders during a disaster?

In order to answer these questions, we developed a survey that is being deployed as a pilot study to the various constituencies involved in different disaster management scenarios. The survey is being administered to fire fighters, emergency medical technicians, emergency department physicians and nurses, emergency management officials, and hospital administrators.

## **FUTURE WORK**

The pilot study is currently underway. The collection of survey responses will be completed by October. A full data analysis will be conducted from the pilot study, allowing us to fine-tune the survey instrument before deploying the survey to a much wider audience. The aim is to have the results of the pilot study to present at the DSI 2012 conference. Insights from the pilot study and how we think they will influence possible conclusions from the forthcoming wider-scaled project will be discussed. Additionally, a discussion of how the full-scale project will be implemented will be presented.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR OPERATIONS**

Answering the general questions posed by this study could help in several operational areas of disaster management. Some of the implications from the results could help streamline various stages of disaster management. For example, the relief stage of disaster management could be heavily influenced and perhaps streamlined based on the agreement of the code of ethics. As another example, if the various disparate parties involved in the evacuation phase of the disaster management cycle agree that the proposed code of ethics is “workable”, then new policies may be developed that directly affect the sequence of evacuating victims of a disaster. The operational, training, and ethical issues surrounding such new policies open numerous avenues for further interesting research.

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