

ADMINISTRAÇÃO E GESTÃO DA ASSISTÊNCIA FARMACÊUTICA

Série Boletins

**CAPACITY BUILDING OF PHARMACIST IN
HUMANITARIAN AID**

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Overview

Over the decade of 2001–2010, an average of more than 700 natural and technological emergencies occurred globally every year, affecting approximately 270 million people and causing over 130,000 deaths annually¹. Twenty-five percent of these emergencies and forty-four percent of these deaths occurred in less developed countries with limited capacities to prepare for and respond effectively to emergencies².

Populations in emergencies and violent conflict suffer from the consequences of societal disruption and increases in mortality and morbidity due to infectious diseases, acute malnutrition, trauma and complications from chronic diseases. When the health of affected communities becomes a vulnerable condition, the medical relief with the medical workforce becomes a vital and devoted operational niche in humanitarian assistance.

There are around 4,000 Western International Non-Governmental Organization (iNGOs), from which 260 are operational³. These include many influential large international organizations, such as Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), Oxfam, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), Save the Children, World Vision, Action Contre la Faim. Many of these iNGOs in the last decades had strengthen and enlarged their capacity to deliver humanitarian aid, and the need to employ more professionals in the humanitarian assistance field has increased tremendously.

Many countries where humanitarian assistance is essential are facing crisis in health care Human Resources and need reinforcement from iNGOs. The example of Human Resource Crisis in Malawi⁴, that draw international humanitarian community's attention is not unique.

Despite the increasing number of INGOs, many of them are facing challenges in maintaining a sustainable pool of humanitarian aid professionals especially in the health care field. Hence, it is important to understand the role of a humanitarian aid professional and the core competencies one should acquire to be able to deliver quality services in humanitarian assistance. Many studies had been conducted to determine core competencies of health care professionals, specifically doctors and nurses during provision of humanitarian assistance, but the role of the pharmacist in the provision of health care in humanitarian assistance has not been explored in detail. Thus, determining universal core competencies of a pharmacist as a humanitarian professional will have a positive impact on the quality of provided health services.

Humanitarian medical assistance and humanitarian health professional

Humanitarian assistance is defined as an aid that seeks to save lives and alleviate suffering of a crisis-affected population, respecting the basic humanitarian principles of humanity, impartiality and neutrality⁵.

The primary goal of humanitarian response to humanitarian crises is to prevent and reduce excess mortality and morbidity. Essential health services are priority health interventions that are effective in addressing the major causes of excess mortality and morbidity. The implementation of essential health services must be supported by actions strengthening the local health system hopefully in a sustainable manner⁶. Human Resources involved in provision of health care response and strengthening the health systems are the most critical constituent of the humanitarian assistance.

Even though all humanitarian organizations have the same objective of providing humanitarian aid, the diversity of emergency situations and the political and cultural context of the host countries contribute to the

complexity and variety of the humanitarian interventions. In addition, the community of the international humanitarian aid workers is heterogeneous, multinational and with different motivations and perceptions on the philosophy of humanitarian assistance. Beyond service delivery, these professionals can also contribute to the coordination of scarce health resources at a strategic level. Humanitarian health professionals often work in complex political environments or post-conflict regions where the capacity of local health structure is weak or non-existent. These professionals organize trainings on new approaches and build capacity of the local professionals on the organization of effective health services. Furthermore, humanitarian health professionals can play a significant role at home advocating for international development assistance in the least developed countries.

Richard Brennan (MBBS, MPH Health Director International Rescue Committee) emphasizes the flexibility and adaptability as key competencies of humanitarian health professional, as one is never sure whether the next health problem will be a complicated obstetric emergency, an epidemic, or a sudden population displacement⁷.

In many settings the humanitarian health professionals will be often overwhelmed by the demands of the job and will have to work under pressure. In addition, cross-cultural awareness, the capacity to acknowledge, respect and integrate the different cultural differences, so as to facilitate achievement of the organizations objectives, is one of the most important skills required in working as a humanitarian professional.

Pharmacist's role in humanitarian assistance

WHO report (Japan, 1993) demonstrates the integral place of a pharmacist within all aspects of health care related interventions to assure the use of quality drugs, disease prevention and health promotion and

recommends that pharmacists are adequately represented in the staff of international health agencies⁸.

Figure 1 presents the distribution of field staff by their roles. The pharmacist role is pooled together with other critical professions, such as Public Health, Emergency, Epidemiology and Lab, in combination representing only 9 percent of the field staff.

Unfortunately, the majority of Humanitarian organizations does not employ pharmacists as part of their field staff, while others consider pharmacists as part of only headquarters team and do not employ them in the field. In many humanitarian organizations the responsibilities of the pharmacist in the field are assigned to nurses and logisticians, resulting in a misallocation of human resources and demotivation of those professionals as failure of the fulfilment of their professional career.

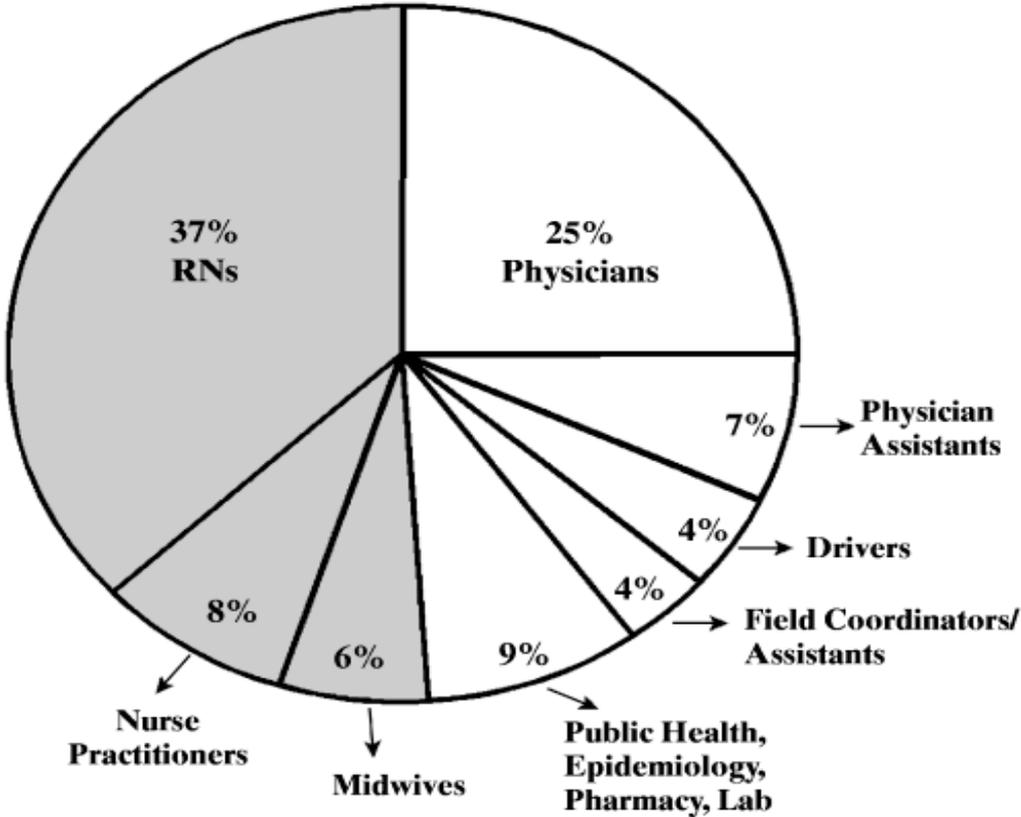


Figure 1: Representation of field staff roles broken down into respective percentages⁹.

In the field the humanitarian aid pharmacists can assure the following tasks¹⁰:

- Prepare, obtain, store, secure, distribute, administer, dispense and dispose of quality medical products
- Provide effective medication therapy management
- Maintain and improve professional performance
- Contribute to improvement effectiveness of the healthcare system and public health

At country level the humanitarian aid pharmacist will be collaborating with other stakeholder partners, including governmental agencies and will be advocating for the access of the population to the quality medicines. In most countries where humanitarian assistance is present the drug regulatory systems are very weak, therefore, most of the iNGOs import the quality medicinal products from the highly regulated countries. The importation rules differ from one country to another and frequently the humanitarian organizations face many problems within hosting country during importation of medicines. The pharmacist can have a significant role in the successful negotiation process during importation.

The described above professional skill-specific competencies of humanitarian aid pharmacist will contribute to the quality outcomes of the health relief programs. Participation of pharmacist within the multidisciplinary teams of humanitarian assistance in health care is to be encouraged. The barriers that prevent pharmacists' employment and their capacity building are to be investigated further.

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