

# ORIGINAL RESEARCH

## Competency-Based Standardized Training for Humanitarian Providers: Making Humanitarian Assistance a Professional Discipline

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### ABSTRACT

The number of people employed in international humanitarian care is growing at a yearly rate of 6%. The demand for better coordination, accountability, and training has led to a need for standardized humanitarian training programs for providers. Training should be based on comprehensive core competencies that providers must demonstrate in addition to their skill-specific competencies. This report explores the competencies specific to humanitarian training that are practice- and application-oriented, teachable, and measurable. Competency-based, standardized programs will be used to select humanitarian workers deployed in future crises and to guide the professionalization of this discipline. (*Disaster Med Public Health Preparedness*. 2013;7:369-372)

**Key Words:** humanitarian response, training and education, competencies, adult learning, professionalization, standards of care

Since the 1960s, the number of people employed in the field of humanitarian assistance has increased at an annual growth rate of about 6%.<sup>1</sup> Initially, humanitarian assistance was provided in an ad hoc manner, with little coordination, accountability, or quality standards of care in service delivery. Humanitarian providers come from a variety of backgrounds. While they may bring specific skill sets such as project management, logistics, security management, medicine, and nursing, they often lack the skills, tools, and knowledge specifically required to work as a team member in complex humanitarian settings and the ability to adjust and adapt their professional skills to resource-poor settings.

Until recently, few established educational paths and standardized courses have existed, and the available ones have not always been based on known competencies related to complex field-based requirements. Fortunately, over the past decade well-designed humanitarian research, practice, and policy-based curricula and vocational training programs have evolved, especially in academic-affiliated centers that are predominantly but not totally restricted to the developed world.

In spite of the advances of the humanitarian sector in terms of building evidence-based training and service delivery, humanitarian intervention has remained uncoordinated and mostly ad hoc, forcing the global humanitarian community to demand improved quality of performance during and after every major

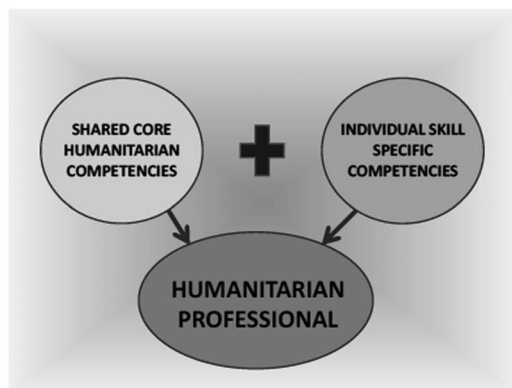
international disaster.<sup>2</sup> Recently, the United Nation's Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) and the World Health Organization's (WHO) Global Health Cluster evaluated the response to the humanitarian crisis in Haiti in January 2010 and highlighted the lack of coordination, transparency, accountability, and oversight of the deployed humanitarian workers.<sup>2,3</sup>

The authors of these reports indicate that the discipline that best defines humanitarian professionals requires a combination of specific skill competencies related to their profession combined with core humanitarian competencies obtained through specialized training, education, and simulation experiences provided by accredited academic affiliated training centers (Figure 1). We explore the competencies specific to humanitarian training that are practice- and application-oriented, teachable, and measurable.

### COMPETENCY-BASED PROFESSIONALIZATION

Until recently, work toward a broader and inclusively coordinated effort of the humanitarian community of provider organizations and agencies has been ignored. This lapse has been in large part due to the lack of a singular "global authority in crises"<sup>4</sup> that would hold the composite humanitarian community both accountable and coordinated.<sup>4-6</sup> While the concept has been introduced, it remains politically charged and without effective debate to date. However, a movement to develop a professional program for

FIGURE 1

**Competencies Required by a Humanitarian Professional.**

FM Burkle, Jr

individual aid providers has begun to move forward both to create standardized humanitarian training programs and a mechanism for humanitarian workers to develop, enhance, and track their skills. At the very core of standardization lies the need for an agreed set of comprehensive, common humanitarian competencies that define the foundation of humanitarian education and practice.<sup>7</sup>

The intent of this movement is to have standardized training programs that (1) offer certification based on completion of common core competency-based curricula, and (2) courses that can be registered and offered to stakeholders such as international organizations (IOs) and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to assist in the selection of humanitarian workers deployable in all disaster and crisis situations. As such, standardized competency-based training programs will serve to catalyze and pave the way toward professionalization of humanitarian professionals and better define what constitutes the humanitarian discipline.

Competency-based training forms the basis of most professional degrees and academic-affiliated training programs. Core competencies have been defined in certain professional fields that require similar knowledge, skills, tools, and quality-based performance. Because public health constitutes a significant part of humanitarian assistance, one can refer to skill-based competencies defined by the Association of Schools of Public Health, which developed a list for global health tracks in Masters of Public Health programs in US universities.<sup>8,9</sup> Similarly, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, in the Terrorism Injuries: Information Dissemination and Exchange program, and the American Medical Association, in the Center for Public Health Preparedness and Disaster Response,<sup>10,11</sup> have developed core competencies

that could be reasonably expected of all relevant health system responders. These organizations define the competencies for disaster response and global public health training, which encompass domestic and international health, including health conditions, organized social responses, and a systems framework that can be used as a model to develop a competency framework of course work and performance for humanitarian providers.

The Consortium of British Humanitarian Agencies (CBHA) is one of the first humanitarian organizations to build a humanitarian competency framework that includes learning and evaluation specific to humanitarian training and fieldcraft.<sup>12</sup> The CBHA has been created to strengthen the coordination and capacity of the NGO sector to deliver appropriate, high quality, and humanitarian assistance quickly to populations affected by disaster. It consists of 15 UK-based NGOs that have committed to implementing 5 objectives that support this purpose.<sup>12,13</sup> These objectives are

- Increasing access to fast, efficient, and effective funding for front-line humanitarian work;
- Increasing numbers of competent national and international managers and leaders;
- Increasing agency surge capacity to respond appropriately to new emergencies;
- Strengthening humanitarian logistics systems; and
- Learning and education.

The core humanitarian competencies framework developed by the CBHA consists of 30 core competencies distributed among 6 categories and divided into 2 main sections: core behaviors for all staff and additional behaviors for first-level line managers. Most humanitarian stakeholders now recognize this framework as the standard for categorizing competencies. Integrated into the core humanitarian competencies framework is a leadership behavior framework. This latter framework is presented as a separate table in the CBHA document to highlight the importance of leadership and to provide a separate, leadership-focused framework for agencies interested in humanitarian care.<sup>13</sup>

In 2010, the enhancing learning and research for humanitarian assistance (ELRHA) program built on CBHA's humanitarian competency framework in its scoping study on professionalizing the humanitarian sector.<sup>1</sup> The ELRHA study involves extensive consultation with humanitarian workers and key stakeholders. It also looks at other initiatives developed by NGOs and IOs including CARE, World Vision, Save the Children, Oxfam, and the Red Cross movement that included comprehensive competency maps for staff assessment and recruitment, simulations, and training. The ELRHA report lists 21 core competencies divided into 4 categories: managing yourself; working with others; achieving results; and using resources.

All competencies are separated into 3 levels of behavioral criteria that become more specific the higher the level.

The ELRHA study indicates that core competencies for humanitarian training and practice must be incorporated into the minimum knowledge-base and skills required for the field in addition to the behavior, moral, and ethical motivation on which humanitarian work is founded. Although humanitarian core competencies can be separated into categories such as knowledge, skills, and attitudes, these categories are not independent of one another. Thus, a complex interplay exists and requires multiple elements of learning that are not always sufficiently translatable or acquired in the classroom and may be difficult to measure.

The ELRHA study<sup>1</sup> provides a series of recommendations relating to humanitarian competencies. The eighth recommendation states the “the listing/table of humanitarian competencies should be further developed,” as an urgent task for a potential International Humanitarian Professional Association (IHPA). The sooner consensus can be achieved on the competencies, the sooner training institutions can start offering courses capable of being certified by the IHPA. This recognition for further development of the humanitarian core competency framework is introduced in the final recommendations of the CBHA report.<sup>13</sup>

## DISCUSSION

As occurred after the 2010 hurricane in Haiti and in other large-scale humanitarian crises, the small NGOs and humanitarian workers are often young and inexperienced providers who lack a professional approach and knowledge of the situation and needs on site. In Haiti, understanding of the Haitian context was limited and communication with the local population was insufficient. Also lacking was the ability to consolidate and report vital information and to assist in providing better support coping strategies.<sup>2</sup> The challenges arising from the Haitian hurricane response were not new, and they produced a number of questions relevant to the selection, training, and qualification of humanitarian service providers. It has been recognized now that solely deploying an aid provider with only specific professional skills (medicine, nursing, project management, security management, or logistics) does not necessarily lead to quality performance, whether these professionals act individually or as members of foreign medical teams.

Even before the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, a need for improved quality and accountability by humanitarian organizations and individuals in the field was widely recognized. During the years a number of singularly focused and specific initiatives have focused on enhancing the quality of performance, service delivery, and accountability of aid in the humanitarian sector. These include the Sphere Project,<sup>14</sup> Livestock Emergency Guidelines and Standards,<sup>15</sup> the Humanitarian Accountability Partnership International,<sup>16</sup> the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Performance in Humanitarian Action,<sup>17</sup> People In Aid,<sup>18</sup>

the Good Enough Guide by the Emergency Capacity Building Project,<sup>19</sup> the Compass method by Groupe Urgence, Réhabilitation, Développement,<sup>20</sup> the Synergie Qualité guide by Coopération Solidarité, Urgence, Développement,<sup>21</sup> and the Inter-Agency Network for Education in Emergencies,<sup>22</sup> among others.

During the past decade, the need for competency-based training and standardization of curricula in the humanitarian sector has become clearer. Today more than 100 graduate-level degree programs in humanitarian assistance are offered by universities in North America and Europe; not-for-profit and private companies provide certification courses; military-sponsored training programs in humanitarian response and civil-military interaction exist; and international NGOs (eg, Médecins Sans Frontiers, the Red Cross movement, and the United Nations agencies such as WHO and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees) provide their workers with required predeployment training.

International efforts in competency-based professionalization are demonstrated by CBHA's and ELRHA's work, which highlight the importance of further developing competencies as a necessary precursor to standardizing courses, certifying humanitarian providers, keeping a registry of certified providers, and creating an international humanitarian professional organization that would ensure the ongoing professional status, research, standards of care, advocacy, and monitoring of member training centers. Recommendations for moving this concept forward include linking the CBHA competencies to measurable learning objectives, creating metrics to evaluate competency-based learning, employing the competency-based curriculum in the classroom and in simulation exercises through different organizations and institutions, and apply the monitoring and evaluation tools in a standardized framework in the field.

Finally, the current generation has already recognized that their productive years will be spent in some aspect of globalization. It is now the humanitarian community's place to support, partner, and positively engage with academia and academic-affiliated training centers worldwide to ensure that a competency-based professionalization process is successful.

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