

Personal reflections on Tsunami, 48 hours later

It is two days after Boxing Day 2004, and I, like the rest of the world knows about Tsunami.¹ Not just something you know about from a documentary on the National Geographic channel; something that could affect Japan or another country located proximal to the Pacific Ocean; something one saw in a movie.

This most catastrophic natural disaster struck with devastating force in South East Asia and the world was affected. Watching the scenes of despair and carnage on all the major news channels was a sobering, unsettling experience. It seems that not since 9-11, a most unnatural disaster, has the world been so shaken by loss of human life in recent times. As a psychiatrist watching with both fascination and horror, the scale of trauma suffered by the survivors was striking. A "BBC" reporter commenting on the return of some of the first survivors to Heathrow airport noted how none would speak on camera or in fact subject themselves to an interview. Visuals of interviewed survivors saw almost each one break down, overcome with emotion. Even an official from the British Embassy in Bangkok, interviewed on efforts to assist surviving Britons with acquiring temporary documents to exit Thailand, seemed bewildered and fragile. The scenes of piled bodies, relatives filing past body bags seeking to identify missing loved ones and the mass destruction to buildings was like nothing anyone could have imagined 48 hours earlier. Unexpected, brutal carnage. The priority of officials to clear debris, clarify the extent of destruction, track down the missing, evacuate tourists, bring relief to the local people and to dispose of the dead. And who are the dead? Who was able to identify them? For many, the loss compounded by lack of closure. I watched from afar, or so it seemed, here in South Africa. But the news of South Africans killed, missing and those who survived did not leave us untouched. Nor did later news of the deaths along the East coast of Africa. We were not spared. The priority was to attend to the physical aspects but I was unavoidably taken with the emotional turmoil being experienced by survivors. Maybe I was witnessing the natural consequences of such a disaster, and yet I could not help but think that this was something different. And maybe it was. In the midst of a balmy Christmas, an unimaginable horror. At a time of maximum relaxation and carefree abandon, death and devastation. No time to prepare, no defence, no forewarning. The sheer violation at a time of extreme vulnerability seemed to be one explanation of the re-

sponse of survivors. A swim in the ocean, the sound of crashing waves would never be the same again. Two weeks earlier I had participated in a studio discussion on a TV programme related to Christmas Blues. Who might have suggested such an event within this context? Beyond comprehension. But for many, Christmas will never be the same. Holidays will never be the same. Life will never be the same. But for some smart psychiatrist or psychologist a research publication looms. They seem to follow each disaster. I hope I am wrong. No doubt it will appear in a major journal, and I will nod knowingly. Exploitation by the careerists in our midst or a scientific obligation? I hope survivors will not grant "interviews" or subject themselves to rating scales. I suspect there will be those who disagree with my sentiments. Good. Raise your voices and let us debate the ethics or whatever of such endeavour. I am amenable to an alternative view and gladly ensure publication. I hope the victims seek comfort from family and friends, a professional if necessary. I hope we do not research these unfortunate souls, but rather listen to and comfort them. We know their misery, we have seen their trauma. I hope that neither they nor I will ever see the like again.

Christopher P. Szabo
Editor-in-Chief

Footnote

1. Tsunami, derived from the Japanese words tsu (harbour) and nami (wave) meaning a series of long high sea waves caused by disturbance of the ocean floor but used to describe a tidal wave.
The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English 6th Edn. JB Sykes, ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1976

Postscript

As of the 29th January 2005, there were 16 published articles on Medline related to the Tsunami. Themes included concerns that the rush to give aid in this instance may detract from other global crises, concerns over warning systems and one article related to psychosocial aspects of aid.