RESPONSE TO HUMAN DISASTER: THE OCEAN RANGER

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ABSTRACT

In February, 1982 the drill rig Ocean Ranger sank in a storm on the Grand Banks with the loss of all on board. This paper examines the aftermath of this disaster from a service delivery perspective.

After a total disaster, all is secondary to the immediate psychosocial needs of those involved. The delivery system of response services that evolved in this instance pointed out a number of Contingency Plan weaknesses relative to anticipation and planning especially in the human need sector. In a disaster, a special component focused on human needs should coordinate existing agencies to identify needs; respond to the physical, emotional, psychological, religious and security requirements; and monitor the need for continuing support for those affected in other than the immediate post-disaster period.

INTRODUCTION

As a seafaring people, loss of life at sea is an ever present occupational hazard for Newfoundland fishermen. The 1970's brought a new way to earn a living at sea: on an oil rig—a towering structure, thirty stories high and safe from most of the hazards that plagued their forefathers. February 15, 1982 proved otherwise. The oil rig Ocean Ranger succumbed in a storm and went to the bottom of the ocean 190 miles off the coast of Newfoundland with a loss of 84 lives.

The Newfoundland Petroleum Directorate, the Government agency responsible for administering the offshore petroleum resource, had recognized the possibility of problems on drilling rigs. A Contingency Plan had been developed in conjunction with the drilling operators and the Federal Government to respond to personal injury or fatality, missing persons, well blow-outs, oil spills, fire, imminent threat to safety of drilling unit, drill vessel damage, research vessel loss or damage, or any combinations of the

above. But with the abundance of hope and optimism for the future which the emerging oil resource brought to the Province, who would be so pessimistic as to plan for a total disaster. Such an event was not explicitly included in the Contingency Plan. The plan, like most emergency procedures, consisted of measures to look after the workers—the men on the rigs—and to activate emergency response agencies. As the events of February 15th unfolded, however, the target group changed, and what was needed was a plan to meet the psycho-social needs of the surviving families. This paper attempts to describe that response, its strengths and shortcomings.

At 01:00 hours on February 15, 1982, Mobil Oil reported to the Petroleum Directorate that the crew of the Ocean Ranger had started to abandon the rig. Weather conditions at the time included 80 knot winds, 50 foot seas and blowing snow. Three supply boats in the area went to the rescue, but by dawn it was apparent that there were no sur-

vivors. After the agencies responding to the emergency met at the Petroleum Directorate at 07:30 hours, the message to be conveyed to the families was, "The rig is gone, you should prepare to expect the worst."

Faced with the dreadful reality that hope for survivors was gone, the Contingency Plan was of little use. The search for bodies would continue and temporary morgue facilities would be set up. But those present at that early morning meeting knew that much work remained to be done for which there were no written guidelines. The surviving families were the group in need and six hours after word was received that the rig was being abandoned attention turned to setting up this psycho-social response.

Although many agencies are equipped to respond to human needs in emergencies, it seemed that some of the interconnections were not in place. Initially a number of ad hoc groups functioned under the coordination of the Emergency Measures Division of the Province Department of Justice.

THE RESPONSE

The heads of the major religious denominations in the Province were asked to help and within two hours all were present at the Petroleum Directorate for a briefing and consultation meeting. For the Newfoundland families, it was decided that the contact should be made through the local clergy. At this point however, the crew manifest available to the Petroleum Directorate included all of the names but only some of the addresses. With this incomplete list, the church representatives tried to determine from the surname what would be the most likely religious affiliation of each person. The historic settlement patterns of the original settlers, principally England, Ireland and Scotland, and relative isolation of Newfoundland communities enables one to link a surname with a religion fairly accurately, and often with a region.

Within a couple of hours each name had been assigned to one of five categories;

Roman Catholic, Anglican, United Church, non-residents and "other", the latter being the responsibility of the Salvation Army representative. The thirty-two non-Newfoundlanders were divided among the four above-mentioned churches.

The calls within Newfoundland were made to the relevant local clergy, but not all contacts were made that first day. Non-resident families were called directly by the four church representatives. In all cases the families involved had already been made aware of the tragedy by the employers, and the message now conveyed was one of sorrow and sympathy on behalf of the Newfoundland church community and the Newfoundland Government.

The message of sympathy was apparently appreciated by all the non-resident families and in a number of instances a continuous liaison was established. Usually the clergyman offered to contact whatever non-local church was involved if the family so wished. In two instances the families indicated their appreciation but advised no further contact was necessary or desired.

After the initial notification process was completed, the group agreed that a continuous liaison between the local clergyman and each family should be maintained, at least until the bodies were located and funeral services completed.

The offices at the Petroleum Directorate soon became the command post for the Church Liaison Committee, a social worker unit and another task group involving the professionals in the field of mental health. These and other ad hoc mechanisms evolved in an attempt to keep pace with the fast moving events of the time.

Realizing that the long hours of waiting for news from the search and rescue effort would be very trying, the Directorate established a 24-hour telephone watch with various staff members volunteering their time. In the early stages social workers were also involved. The telephone watch continued into the second

week until the search for bodies was officially discontinued.

In retrospect, this telephone watch was of great value and relevance. There were some mothers, brothers, wives and other people who called every night, or even several times during the night, to see if there was any change in the search attempts or weather, or any indication that the last bodies found could include "theirs." Others called offering food, clothes and money, or accommodations for the victim's relatives who had come from out of town, or just offering to babysit children.

With respect to press relations, there was concern that the terrible effects of the tragedy could be compounded by insensitive media sensationalism. A decision was made to shield the relatives as much as possible. This was a moral decision which took priority over press freedom or the media's right to access of information.

In recognition of the above, and of the media's right to information, a news screening was imposed by the Directorate. This was done carefully and with full explanation to the media, and the result seemed to satisfy the moral issue as well as to allow adequate news coverage.

Meanwhile the Church Liaison Committee was concerned about families in material need; a suitable memorial service for the Ocean Ranger victims; the role of the clergy in the identification process; and the problem of continuous monitoring and support.

Each family waited in hope that the body of their kin would be found. Care had to be taken not to raise hopes, and to spare the relatives unnecessary exposure to the difficult task of identifying bodies. It was decided that the twelve employers would view each body separately and individually in order to make a tentative identification. Once that identification was made, the relevant church representative would be contacted immediately and he would alert his local clergyman to be on standby. Some of the

bodies were not in good condition because of water immersion and the method of retrieval which had to be used in the rough seas. It was, therefore, felt that positive identification should be made by a friend or a relative other than the next of kin.

It was anticipated that it would be difficult to make contact with a relative without alerting the wife, parents or children. Consequently a procedure was worked out at one of the initial Church Liaison Committee meetings which involved determining at the outset who would make the positive identification, and then making whatever arrangements were necessary to keep the remainder of the family uninformed until a positive identification had been made. There were some problems with this procedure initially. A few employers wanted to notify the families directly and some next of kin insisted on making the positive identification. On the whole, however, the procedure worked well and there were no instances where tentative identification proved to be incorrect.

Many community services provided assistance to mitigate the trauma of the identification process: the General Hospital, where the final identification was to be made; the Pastoral Care Unit at the Hospital; the Department of Social Services; and the Mental Health Division of the Department of Health, in concert with the senior psychiatrists from the hospitals in St. John's.

A second tragedy at sea was overshadowed by the Ocean Ranger. This was the loss of the Russian container ship, the *Mekhanik Tarasov*, which went down at 05:00 hours on Tuesday, February 16th about 65 miles east of the Ocean Ranger. Of the crew of thirty-seven there were only five survivors. Thirteen of the bodies arrived in St. John's at the same time as thirteen of the Ocean Ranger bodies were received. Although the main employer or contractor on the Ocean Ranger was the Ocean Drilling and Exploration Company (ODECO), there were eleven other employers. All of them were involved throughout this entire process

and for some at least, especially the younger ones and those who had not experienced tragedy at close range, the burden was great.

Complications began to surface after the first two bodies from the Ocean Ranger had been tentatively identified and the public became aware that these had been transported to the General Hospital. In very short order entire families appeared at the hospital. A social worker had been assigned to the central information desk to direct "Ocean Ranger" people to the appropriate area. However, when the second group of five bodies was received, all families showed up at the same time even though staggered times had been arranged. Fortunately by this time there were six social workers and three chaplains. The procedure involved gently isolating each family, and a social worker to stay with them, with the clergy moving between the various groups. A clergyman also accompanied the person identifying the body.

Some additional factors now entered the scene. Although no hope remained that any of the men were still alive, the families were pinning their hopes on recovery of the bodies. On Wednesday, the third day after the disaster, seventeen bodies had been recovered. This raised hopes that many more bodies would be found. However, as Thursday and Friday passed with no results, hope faded and the last two recoveries were made on Saturday, February 20th. Eventually, hope rested with the possibility that bodies would be found on the rig once divers went down or that sooner or later the third lifeboat would be found with bodies on board.

It is worth noting how important it was to the families to find the bodies. As with most people, Newfoundland families refuse to fully accept the reality of death at sea until the body has been found. This is part of the continuing "trauma" that many of the families are still suffering, especially so in the case of parents. An additional component in the trauma is the tragic irony of husbands and sons being lost at sea while involved in a

highly technical and sophisticated industry where such disasters "just don't happen." The question was put so often, "If they can put people on the moon, surely there must have been ways of avoiding this." In other words, while families seem to reconcile themselves to death or tragedy that occurs in a "traditional way," many of the Ocean Ranger families were sorely troubled by the suspicion that "this tragedy need not have happened."

In the meantime another set of circumstances and events occurred that in some instances was to cause further aggravation and stress to the families. Among these were the appearance of private investigators from the United States; the pursuit of cases by various lawyers from within and without the Province; the arrival of the Kielland Foundation representatives from Norway; the doubts about being able to accept Workers Compensation benefits without jeopardizing possible claims; and the prominence given to the disaster by the media. In subsequent weeks and months further stress was added with the formation of two local, but in some ways conflicting, foundations set up to help the families; the U.S. Coastguard Inquiry; the belated setting up of the Joint Provincial-Federal Inquiry; and the diving survey on the Ocean Ranger which was completed in August.

CONTINUING SUPPORT

As the weeks and months passed, it was clear that some mechanism would be needed to monitor the effects on the families over the longer term. One means of achieving some form of continuous contact was the mobilization of local resources and networks which could monitor and respond to individual situations throughout the province with coordination and support from the Church Liaison Committee. This would be done in concert with the family doctor and/or public health nurse, and the teachers associated with the children. In this way there would exist an unobtrusive local network which would have

immediate access to a number of provincial resources. Initially the contact and initiator of this local support and monitoring system was expected to be the local clergyman, but it seems now that most of the onus may be on the local doctor.

Further, the Mental Health Division of the Department of Health would provide a backup resource to this local community support in order to make accessible any of its resources as soon as the need was recognized among the Ocean Ranger families. To date, neither the services of the local support group nor those of the Mental Health Division have been called into play in any large measure.

Although there are a number of instances of continued involvement of the local clergy with specific families and problems, the Church Liaison Committee reports that the local networks did not recognize many serious problems among the families. These included at least two attempted suicides and several cases requiring psychiatric in- and out-patient treatment. On the advice of the mental health professionals, there are continued efforts to maintain a monitoring and liaison role, especially in view of the various events and anniversaries that are soon to come, such as Christmas and February 15, 1983, the first anniversary of the disaster.

In early March a group of St. John's businessmen and civic leaders set up a fund-raising organization, the Ocean Ranger Telegram Foundation, aimed at providing financial help for the Ocean Ranger families.

In April 1982, another response mechanism, the Ocean Ranger Families Foundation was organized with the objective of representing the broad interests of families and next of kin of Ocean Ranger victims. The resources of the Mental Health Division and the assistance of the senior psychiatrists were offered to the Families Foundation soon after it was set up. It was also suggested that the loose local network mentioned above might be of use to the Foundation in its monitoring and support role with the

families. To date, however, neither of these resources has been called upon by the Foundation, and it has established its own "Families Committee" to keep in close contact with the families.

At this point in time it is not possible to say how effective these various networks have been. What must be admitted here is that although there are no doubt many potential as well as actual needs and problems of an emotional nature among the Ocean Ranger families, there has not yet been a very effective linkage established between these people and the resources available.

UNRECOGNIZED AND UNMET NEEDS

There were other groups and individuals in addition to the Ocean Ranger families whose emotional needs were great but who, in large measure, were outside the focus of attention. One such group comprised the employers or managers from the twelve companies who had from one to over forty employees on the Ocean Ranger. For some, the pressures were greater than others either because of the numbers involved, the closeness of the particular employers to the men who were lost, or for various other reasons.

All these employers or contractors were on the firing line from hour one. They were expected to act logically and clearly in very difficult circumstances, and over a period of time when the mental, emotional and physical stresses were indeed great. All participated, and indeed demanded to participate, in the identification process which lasted more than a week. In addition to being on call twenty-four hours to the temporary morgue at Pier 17, these men were expected to carry out many of the normal functions of their positions, maintain close rapport with the families, be the front line in the identification process and at the same time respond to sometimes difficult media and public. For these employers, most of whom had close personal friends on the rig, the emotional toll was high and in some cases the

pressures became such that before the end of the week several of them had been replaced.

The need for backup support, advice and other help was not sufficiently recognized at the time either by the contractors themselves, their superiors or by others involved with them close to the tragedy. In a sometimes hostile and suspicious atmosphere they tried to carry out a number of very difficult tasks with oftentimes nowhere to turn for advice or consolation.

Another group of individuals tragically affected by the Ocean Ranger included those women who were girlfriends or common-law wives of Ocean Ranger crew members. While the situation in common-law arrangements was less vague and offered some recognition and help, such was not the case for others who had no legally recognized relationship or status but who were in fact deeply involved and sometimes very dependent. In at least two instances involving children born outside marriage subsequent to the Ranger sinking, there have been complications relating either to proof of paternity, or to provisions of the Workers Compensation Act and common-law legislation.

There is no accurate count of the number of women in this category but several cases are known. Regardless of numbers, however, certain facts are obvious. These women were in just as much shock and sorrow as most wives and in some cases much greater; they were denied access to facts and information available to "families" or next of kin; They were "ab initio" unrecognized or ignored by official agencies and many families and relatives; their grief must have been compounded by the fact that in some cases at least, they had to keep their sorrow pent up without access to the traditional supports of family and church, and the understanding and sympathy of the community.

In some cases the indication is that it was not just a matter of not being offered support, but rather of harassment and condemnation by the victim's family. In some in-

stances there had really been no positive rapport or relationship between the victim and his family at the time of the tragedy. However, when being hired the individual had indicated his next of kin as father or mother, for example, and this was the only legally and officially recognized griever. This points out a failing in the personal data recording procedures that should be rectified.

The experience of other disasters indicates the need for long term, continuous monitoring for trauma-induced, but often belated, stress reactions. With this in mind, perhaps there is need for the relevant local doctors to be regularly updated regarding behavioural signs that might indicate adjustment difficulties among the Ocean Ranger families. This could take the form of a brief seminar or other mechanism sponsored by the Department of Health or some other agency.

Another group subjected to a great deal of shock and trauma at the time of the tragedy included those involved in search and recovery operations, and the members of the RCMP and Royal Newfoundland Constabulary, and others, involved in the identification process.

While there has been no specific request for help from among this group, neither has there been any formal acknowledgement of their ordeal. The work these people carried out very capably was in many cases extremely exacting and difficult.

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In light of the Ocean Ranger tragedy and with a view to a more premeditated and coordinated response to human needs in any future emergency or disaster, the following suggestions are presented:

1. That all Contingency Plans have a "disaster component" in which human needs have top priority.
2. Recognizing that emotional trauma does occur in emergencies involving threat to, or loss of life, that the knowledge and ex-

- perience of professionals in the psychiatric field be involved "ab initio" in the planning of emergency and disaster response.
3. That a special "Church Liaison" committee be permanently established to tie into contingency planning at a very early stage.
 4. That the "Church Liaison" committee be involved in any scenario involving threat to or loss of life and that this connection be included in all contingency planning even at the company level.
 5. That a special "disaster scenario" committee be established by the oil and gas industry in particular, comprising professionals in the areas of law, medicine, administration and human relations to be available in the event of a disaster affecting even one of the companies concerned.
 6. That the personal data required at hiring be standardized to include provisions so that:
 - a. a positive identification could be made in any circumstances (the use of metal identification tags is advocated);
 - b. the next of kin be correctly identified;
 - c. the person to be contacted in case of emergency is identified;
 - d. the beneficiary or beneficiaries are correctly identified;
 - e. religious affiliation of the employee and family be requested as well as identification of the relevant clergy; and
 - f. a regular updating of personal data be carried out.
 7. that in contingency planning the issue of press liaison be adequately addressed at an early stage.

CONCLUSION

Ten months after the sinking of the *Ocean Ranger*, the human tragedy is ongoing. Some needs have been recognized and met. Undoubtedly, time will uncover some new problems just as it will heal some of the wounds.

Much has been learned from this tragedy from an engineering and technical perspective. It is to be hoped that much can be learned as well from the human perspective which, in the event of other disasters anywhere, could help ensure an effective and comprehensive response.

RÉSUMÉ

En février 1982, la plate-forme de forage *Ocean Ranger* sombra au cours d'une tempête sur les Grands bancs de Terre-Neuve. Tous les membres de l'équipage périrent. L'auteur examine les conséquences du désastre dans l'optique de la prestation de services.

Après un tel désastre, ce sont les besoins psycho-sociaux immédiats qui ont préséance sur toute autre considération. En effet, le cas de l'*Ocean Ranger* a fait ressortir un certain nombre de lacunes dans le plan d'urgence pour ce qui est de la prévision et de la planification de services, en particulier des services à la personne. Lors d'un désastre, un comité spécial des services à la personne devrait coordonner les efforts des organismes existants en vue de cerner les besoins, de répondre aux besoins d'ordre physique, affectif, psychologique et religieux ainsi qu'aux exigences en matière de sécurité, et d'être à l'affût des besoins de services continus manifestés par les personnes touchées après la période qui suit immédiatement la catastrophe.