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## Managing mass casualty events is just the application of normal activity on a grander scale for the emergency health services. Or is it?

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## GUEST COMMENTARY

Managing mass casualty events is just the application of normal activity on a grander scale for the emergency health services. Or is it?

**Dudley McArdle CSC, BA**

*“A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic”*

Joseph Stalin

While not wanting to support Stalin’s sentiment, there is an element in what he says which applies to how health professionals and emergency services operators in general must approach a mass casualty situation. They can’t afford to be ‘distracted’ by individual victims, but must direct their efforts towards “the most good for the greatest number”. While this is not how they carry out their day-to-day business, it is vital that they change to this approach when there are large numbers of community members affected.

And this is the point very clearly made by the articles by Dr Spencer and Ms Wong. Each of them has come to the conclusion that, when an event results in, or has the potential to result in, mass casualties, approaches must be adopted by response agencies which are different from the norm. ‘Business-as-usual’ will not work!

Caroline Spencer points out that “Responding effectively to a medical crisis of this nature goes beyond the normal routine of many [Most? All?] health care facilities and the capacity of their staff”. She convincingly argues that routine activities and ‘normal’ triage procedures must be changed and have to result in a significant ‘surge’ program. She arrives at the valid conclusion that “Emergency health services [and I extrapolate this observation to ALL emergency services, not just medical] require exceptional emergency arrangements and additional or extraordinary assistance”.

Diana Wong mirrors this conclusion. She, too, highlights the requirement for changes to institutional capacity (through adopting surge measures), to triage procedures and to the whole ‘plan of operations’.

Both articles identify what all emergency services must recognise: That a structured and auditable plan is required to change from ‘normal business’ to ensure the safety and security of community members in a mass casualty event.

This was typified in an event with which I had some personal experience: the 2006 Melbourne Commonwealth Games. I contributed to the coordination of the health and human services preparedness for that event. There was significant, complex planning (at Federal, State and local government levels) conducted, beginning years before the event. That, together with the extensive additional resources provided underlined that a mass casualty event around the Games (and essentially, that was what we were preparing for) was not going to be able to be managed using existing resources and arrangements. By definition it was never going to be ‘business as usual’.

As a value added benefit, both Spencer and Wong provide a well-researched, extensive list of references which will be well appreciated by many readers.