

NDMS Team Operations In Hostile Environments

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Goal:

Upon completion of this session, NDMS team members will have an awareness of any environment's potential for becoming hostile. In addition, team members will possess the knowledge and skills to function safely in a hostile environment.

Objectives:

1. Recognize the threat that hostile environments pose to NDMS team members.
2. Define a hostile environment in terms of an NDMS mission.
3. Recognize the hazards associated with hostile environments found in disasters.
4. Identify the tactical considerations most prevalent to NDMS mission.
5. Recognize the tactical challenges encountered while ensuring the safety and security of the team.
6. Recall the tips to remain safe in hostile environments.

Background:

Throughout the evolution of NDMS, team members have found themselves subjected to hostile environments, and the consequences of being unprepared for these environments.

Even as early as the first deployment to St. Croix in 1989 after Hurricane Hugo, the DMAT found itself facing security issues, not the least of which was that the entire island was under Martial Law!

When Hurricane Andrew struck southern Florida in 1992, there was no intact local law enforcement, nor was there any infrastructure in place to protect the disaster responders, let alone the public. Team members found themselves alone in the field, without protection, and with only their own ingenuity to rely upon.

In September of 1995, following Hurricane Marilyn's devastating impact upon the US Virgin Islands, the first wave of NDMS teams arrived less than 24 hours after the storm. The first team was held at the airport due to rioting, looting and gunfire, until the US Marshal Service could safely escort them to badly damaged St. Thomas hospital.

During the summer of 1996, teams were deployed to provide medical support to the Olympic games in Atlanta, Georgia. In the midst of this deployment, a bomb exploded, injuring dozens of people and killing one. The explosion occurred in Centennial Park, the staging area for a number of NDMS team members.

In April of 1999, NDMS deployed team members to the 50th anniversary of the NATO summit. This mission was to provide medical support to the Washington D.C. Metropolitan Medical Strike Team (MMST) and the US Marine Corps Chemical / Biological Incident Response Force (CBIRF). The expectation was for NDMS team members to provide direct medical care to any casualties sustained as a result of a terrorist act. During this deployment, NDMS members were subjected to bomb scares directed at the teams.

Clearly, the need exists for NDMS team members to possess an awareness of the inherent dangers associated with intentional hostile acts to which they may be subjected.

Introduction:

A hostile environment may be described as any circumstance that threatens the well-being of the individual health care provider, disaster team, general public, or any combination thereof. Hostile environments may result from intentional acts such as terrorists attacks, or unintentional events such as natural disasters. Those responding need to anticipate the development of a potentially hostile environment.

As healthcare providers, many of us have developed a keen sense of patients' needs, however, we often fail to foresee our own needs, particularly those of safety and security. These two specific factors must be at the forefront of our initial and ongoing assessment of disaster response. Team members must consider their safety and security foremost in order to successfully complete the mission. This is a fundamental concept of tactical medicine. The sacrifice of human life is no longer an acceptable risk.

Surveying For Hazards

Embedded throughout EMS education is the concept of "managing the incident" and rendering emergency medical care, while mitigating any consequences of a variable environment. In a disaster response situation, this process should begin as part of the pre-deployment needs assessment. For example, deploying to a planned mass gathering such as a special event or political function may require planning for remote staging, onsite area familiarization and integration with other agencies/teams. During this needs assessment, hazards are identified and a plan developed to mitigate each potential hazard. Other needs may be addressed such as transportation, entry/egress routes, patient evacuation plans and contingency plans should your team require additional resources.

During the actual deployment, a continuous reassessment of the environment is critical. New hazards should be identified and addressed, and plans to mitigate them should be communicated to all. Teams must be prepared to respond to unforeseen dangers encountered during outreach activities, such as rival gangs, clandestine drug labs or emotionally disturbed individuals.

A memory aide to assist in assessing for hazards (both initially and ongoing) is **EHS: Every Hazard is Significant** or *Environmental/Human/Structural*. Environmental hazards include temperature extremes, terrain features and wind direction. Human hazards include consequences of displaced populations, intentional acts of violence and terrorism. Structural hazards include damaged or collapsed buildings, disruption in utility services, and access/egress routes in buildings. The assessment of hazards using a general classification system such as this helps to organize and promote the recognition and resolution of the dangers quickly and effectively.

The Tactical Environment

While many of the hazards previously discussed are significant in terms of their potential consequences, one of the most dangerous and potentially lethal situations is encountered in the tactical environment. Tactical-emergency medical support for law enforcement operations is a highly dangerous and specialized field that requires extensive training and frequent practice. The tactical emergency medical environment encompasses a multitude of arenas, including high-risk warrant searches, dignitary protection, clandestine lab searches, “medicine across the barricade,” hostage situations, and other law enforcement environments.

More commonly the tactical environment for an NDMS team involves traveling to and setting up a base of operations. While largely considered a logistics task, team mobilization and transport also has a tactical component. Ensuring a clear and safe travel route is of paramount importance. It may be necessary to employ the use of detours and reroutes in order to minimize threats. Response to a threat should rely on known intelligence and should always err on the side of safety. For example, during the disaster response to Hurricane Marylyn in St. Thomas, it was necessary for teams to alter their travel plans in response to intelligence indicating gunfire along a particular road.

Once at the scene, it is necessary to resurvey the area to identify current safety threats and concerns. Observe the entrance/egress of people and resources, equipment storage and pedestrian traffic. Appropriate planning and placement of logistical resources will help to avoid potential problems such as the theft/looting of medical supplies.

It is beyond the scope of this session to list all of the different tactical considerations present when establishing the disaster team base of operations. However, assessing for vulnerabilities both internally and externally will help promote mission safety. Further information and techniques to ensure team safety under such conditions should be obtained from both law enforcement and military resources. These agencies may provide

information on establishing secure perimeters, designating vehicle parking, and ensuring the presence of law enforcement personnel in the disaster team area while on high-risk assignments.

Functioning Safely in the Tactical Environment

Many field safety tips can be found through a variety of sources including EMS street survival books, law enforcement textbooks and through self-defense/self awareness classes. The follow is a list of several commonly used team safety tips:

Personal Tips:

- Rest whenever possible.
- Hydrate frequently. (carry with you, water in canteens, camelback etc.)
- Eat often. (avoid simple sugars, caffeine)
- Dress appropriately for climate. (layer when necessary)
- Dress in subdued colors. (no bright colors or reflective clothing)
- Anticipate needs associated with climatic extremes. (suntan lotion /winter hats)

Operational Tips:

- Always have a route of entry and egress for everywhere you go.
 - Never let someone you don't know get between you and the door.
 - Have a pre-set assembly point (in a safe place) that every one knows to go to incase something goes wrong.
- Avoid domestic disputes –Always.
 - Never intervene, as this is a law enforcement situation.
- Stay away from animals.
 - Even cute and tame animals/pets can carry disease.
 - Request VMAT support/expertise as needed.
- Never touch a firearm.
 - **Consider all firearms to be loaded.**
- If you believe you have entered a facility that poses a threat to you, such as a residence that is a clandestine drug lab:
 - **Leave immediately by the route that you came in.**
 - Do not turn on/off lights, thermostats, stoves/burners
 - Do not sit down, smoke, touch/lean on anything
 - Drug dealers are known for setting booby traps designed to injure or kill. Your safest exit is the route you entered.

- **Responding to an explosion may put you at risk for detonation of a secondary device, specifically intended to harm responders.**
 - Secondary explosive devices are very common in Europe and the Middle East and are becoming more common in the US.
 - Some explosive devices are designed to be detonated by radio transmissions.
 - **Do not** use radio transmitters (two way radios, two way pagers, cell phones etc.) in the area of a bomb threat or explosion.
 - Never stand or go near mailboxes, dumpsters capable of disguising an additional device.

- When knocking on a door, never stand in front of the door.
 - Always stand to the side that has the doorknob on it.

- Never, under any circumstances, eat food not prepared by your team.
 - It is professional to accept the food as a gift, but don't eat it!

- Always travel in groups of at least two when leaving the BOO.
 - Never leave the BOO without telling someone and having a radio.

Tactical operations are, by their nature, very dynamic and may change on a minute-by-minute basis, so be prepared for changes in the situation that may happen very quickly. Tactical operations tend to go on for long periods of time (hours or even days). Minimize your radio traffic - the perpetrators may be listening in. Do not wear brightly colored or reflective clothing - it can make you a target for the perpetrators. Many times tactical operations result in some form of legal action, so be careful of what you say to bystanders, patients and the news media.

Summary:

A hostile environment may be described as any circumstance that threatens the well-being of the individual health care provider, the disaster team, general public, or any combination thereof. During the actual deployment, a continuous reassessment of the environment is crucial. The utilization of **EHS: Every Hazard is Significant** or *Environmental /Human / Structural* provides guidance in both initial and ongoing assessment of hazards.

Although NDMS team members may be called upon to provide direct support of law enforcement operations, the more common concern for NDMS members involves addressing the challenges to the safety and security of the disaster response team. The tactical environment is dangerous and dynamic. It challenges the most seasoned veteran, as well as the newest team member. It is important to understand possible threats and the steps necessary to mitigate them.