

Disaster Myths and Realities

Media coverage of recent disasters, such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, have exposed the public to numerous health related issues which may include many misconceptions. Therefore, which of the following statements do you feel are true and which are false?

Thanks to [Dr. Mike Davey](#), Professor of Health Sciences, for this learning opportunity.

1. T – F Dead bodies, left unburied, are a dangerous source of disease epidemics after disasters.

Reality: Disaster victim's bodies pose little or no threat to public health.

2. T – F Burying victims quickly in mass graves gives survivors a sense of relief.

Reality: Survivors have a strong need to identify lost loved ones and grieve for them in customary ways.

3. T – F Identifying large numbers of casualties is all but impossible. Mass graves are sometimes the only solution.

Reality: Even large numbers of bodies should be dealt with systematically, to facilitate their identification. Mass graves should always be avoided.

4. T – F Any kind of international assistance is needed, and right away.

Reality: A hasty response that is not based on a needs evaluation can contribute to the chaos. It is better to wait until genuine needs have been assessed.

5. T – F Foreign medical volunteers with any kind of medical background are needed following a disaster.

Reality: The local population almost always covers immediate life-saving needs. Only medical personnel with skills that are not available in the affected country are usually needed.

6. T – F Natural disasters cause deaths at random.

Reality: Disasters cause more damage to vulnerable geographic areas, which are more likely to be inhabited by poor people. Especially in developing countries, disasters take a greater toll on the poor.

7. T – F Locating disaster victims in temporary settlements is the best alternative.

Reality: It should be the last alternative. Funds may be better spent on building materials, tools, and other construction-related support in the affected country.

8. T – F Things are back to normal within a few weeks.

Reality: The effects of a disaster last a long time. Countries deplete much of their financial and material resources in the immediate post-impact phase. Successful relief operations take account of the fact that donor interest tends to wane as needs and shortages grow more pressing.