

First International Conference on Burns and Fire Disasters

(Palermo, Sicily, 25-28 September 1990)

The First International Conference on Burns and Fire Disasters was held in Palermo, Sicily, from 25 to 28 September 1990. It was organized by the Mediterranean Burns Club and the Burn Centre and Plastic Surgery Department of the Palermo Civic Hospital, with the co-operation of several Italian ministries, international governmental organizations (WHO, the Council of Europe and the Commission of the European Communities), non-governmental organizations and specialized associations. The Conference was attended by some 200 delegates from all over the world representing the bodies mentioned above, civil defence units, fire brigades and specialized hospitals. They included specialists in the medical, paramedical, safety, logistic and training aspects of disaster management. ICRC and Italian Red Cross representatives also took part in the meeting.

The aim of this Conference was to gather information, consider the results and lessons drawn from the various types of experience acquired by the participants and compare research work and studies carried out on the theoretical aspects of disaster management in general and more specifically on the medical, paramedical, logistic and administrative components of burn treatment and fire disaster management. Participants were also invited to discuss preventive and safety measures, training programmes and information and communication problems in this type of disaster situation.

The opening ceremony took place at Parliament House on 25 September, in the presence of the Italian Minister for Civil Defence, Mr. Vito Lattanzio. Speakers included representatives of the regional authorities and the City of Palermo, the President of the Mediterranean Burns Club, Dr. S.W.A. Gunn, the Head of the Burn Centre and Plastic Surgery Department of the Palermo Civic Hospital, Professor M. Masellis, and the Head of the EC Commission's Civil Defence Service, Dr. Fulvio Paolini.

The work of the Conference was divided among four Commissions, which covered the following topics:

- Fire disasters;
- Preparedness for primary burns emergencies;
- Fire disaster management and related clinical problems;
- Information and communication: the role of national and international organizations.

These four main topics were introduced by some 90 different presentations. Each series of presentations on a given theme was followed by a round table of experts whose task was to summarize and draw conclusions from the subjects discussed and to put forward recommendations.

These conclusions and recommendations were presented at the last plenary session, in the form of reports that reaffirmed and specified a number of principles and rules for disaster management, prevention and training, which are also endorsed by the various components of the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement.

The Conference laid particular emphasis on the need for each country's public authorities to adopt a *multidisciplinary approach* in *planning* rescue operations in the event of disaster and to *co-ordinate* the work of the security services, civil defence units and fire brigades, Red Cross and Red Crescent teams, and the voluntary agencies involved.

The participants also stressed the importance of ensuring that communities became *self-sufficient* in coping with the emergency phase of a disaster and the vital need for *volunteers* properly trained in disaster preparedness and rescue activities.

As regards *prevention*, the participants felt it would be useful for each country to draw up a "map" of potential risks based on assessments of previous disasters, so as to improve and strengthen the services required to cope with emergency situations.

The Conference also considered it necessary to improve the provisions made for emergency treatment of burn victims and their speedy transfer to hospital, and the technical and psychological preparedness of rescue teams and professional and volunteer staff involved in rescue operations, with special emphasis on psychological assistance to the victims. It recommended that emphasis be laid on the *training* of medical staff to deal with the aftermath of disasters (simulation exercises, constant updating of technical knowledge, further training courses, etc.) and that first-aid and health education courses be

extended to specific sectors of the population, particularly school-children.

The Conference's proceedings and conclusions showed an awareness that disaster management is becoming a *science*, which is not yet fully mastered and will doubtless prove to be a major challenge in the years to come.

The Conference was a signal success, thanks to the high standard of the attendance, the quality of the discussions and the excellent organization of its proceedings. It also enabled the participants to gain a better understanding of the ICRC's mandate and of the special nature of its relief and medical activities in times of armed conflict.
