

# To Need or Not to Need . . .

Marvin L. Birnbaum, MD, PhD

*Want is a growing giant whom the coat of Have was never large enough to cover.*

Emerson: *The Conduct of Life: Wealth*

*Those who want much are always much in need.*

Horace: *Odes*

During a recent meeting of a special Task Force on Disaster Research of the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine in Gothenberg, Sweden, I was struck by the word, "Need." The word arose in the discussions surrounding further definition of the Disaster Research Template.<sup>1</sup> The group of discussants had reached consensus that a most important aspect of a disaster response is the identification of what really is needed. Then, the success of any response can be measured by how successfully these needs were met.

As outlined in the first version of the Template, in a disaster, there most often exist distinct differences between demands and needs. In the discussion, needs, demands, and supply were illustrated as three individual circles of varying size (domain) depending on the magnitude of the element. The ideal situation would exist when the domains of need and demand were contained within the domain of supply. Success of relief efforts can be assessed by the degree to which the domains of need and supply overlap.

It soon became clear that the prime objective of a disaster response is to meet the needs of the affected population; it is a bonus if some of the demands that did not coincide with the needs also were satisfied. Consequently, the discussion moved to mechanisms available to assess the needs of the affected population. Without an accurate assessment of the needs, the actual success of the relief efforts cannot be judged.

Although the discussion proceeded into mechanisms for the assessment of the medical needs of a population, my mind paused and reflected upon the discordance among needs, demands, and wants, and how really different needs are from both wants and demands. To me, needs are synonymous with necessity; *necessity* is defined as—"the power of natural law that cannot be other than it is; physical compulsion placed on man by nature."<sup>2</sup> It seems to me that our judgments about responses and consequently our actions, are based not on need, but on wants and wishes that become demands.

Since we departed from the discussions in Gothenberg, I often have thought about these differences and how they affect our behaviors. For those of us fortunate enough to come from relatively affluent societies, it is difficult to distinguish between wants and necessities; we intermix these domains, and we demand that both be satisfied equally. I question whether we really appreciate our needs, as satisfying our basic needs is assumed. In fact, often we use these terms interchangeably!

This may be difficult to understand for those of you who cannot assume that even your most basic needs will be satisfied today—for you *know* the differences. I think of those who have experienced the terror associated with eking out an existence while being the victims of a complex humanitarian emergency, such as being refugees or victims of war. You must teach us to appreciate the differences, for we are naive. To many of us, wants equal needs, and we demand that we have a right to fulfillment of our wants.

Since the Gothenberg experience, I have focused on behaviors in our disciplines and suggest each of you do the same. What does it really mean when you state, "I really need this"? What does it really mean when you propose that we need a new organization?

It seems to me that there are two types of needs: 1) those required for existence; and 2) those required for progress. We assume the right to necessities unless we are threatened with inadequate supplies either personally or organizationally. Some things are required for personal (not material) growth or for the growth of an organization essential for the progress of the discipline. For progress to occur, it is essential that needs be met. But when resources are limited, the needs must be separated clearly from the wants and wishes. Great care be exercised, for too many wants coupled with insufficient satisfaction of needs not only will bring an individual to his or her knees, but will do the same for organizations.

I respect the recent formation of the National Association of EMS Educators, for the EMS educators recognized that the needs for progression of their aspect of the discipline were not being met by any of the current organizations. But, I also offer a word of caution: *Do not be deceived by wants disguised as needs.* I recognize the needs of those who reside over or near the New Madrid fault in the United States, but are these needs being buried by other wants of the population at risk? I know there are many needs of refugee populations and I am overwhelmed by how great they are compared to the resources available. I admire those humanitarians who risk the comfort of assuming satisfaction of their own needs while attempting to identify and satisfy the necessities of others. I appreciate the needs for undergraduate and graduate degree programs in emergency medical services and disaster medicine and management, as it will not be possible to move our disciplines forward without such programs. I understand the motivation for curricular changes, but there must be distinction between what is necessary to accomplish a defined task and what would be nice. Need must be the driving force in each of the above. And, the domain of each of the elements must be defined clearly or the process will fail.

For those of us who profess to be in a helping and humanitarian profession, we have a responsibility to identify real needs and separate them from wants and desires. Meeting needs comes first whether for individuals, populations, or organizations. And if

resources permit, may you, your family, your friends and your organizations each satisfy as many wants as is possible.

*In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it. The last is the real tragedy.*

Oscar Wilde: *Lady Windermere's Fan*

## References

1. Task Force on Quality Control of Disaster Management of the World Association for Disaster and Emergency Medicine: Disaster medical response research: A template in the Utstein style. *Prehospital and Disaster Medicine* 1996;11:83–90.
2. *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language*, College Edition, Cleveland: The World Publishing Co, 1968, p 980.