

EDITORIAL

From the Editor-in-Chief

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The cover photo on this issue of the journal relates to the Deepwater Horizon drilling rig explosion and the resulting massive oil spill into the Gulf of Mexico. The profound economic effects on the Gulf region are significant and well documented. The public health and environmental effects, which may be similarly significant, are much more difficult to delineate and quantify, especially when examined under the lens of scientific scrutiny.

This is not only true of studies of this event but it is also reflected in studies and evaluations of previous oil spills, such as the *Exxon Valdez* incident. As opposed to earlier responses, the immediate and sustained engagement of the scientific and public health communities in studying the impact of the Gulf oil spill has been laudable. This is especially important regarding this event because of the large-scale use of dispersants to break up the oil, which has added another dimension of human and environmental health concern.

The response to the Gulf oil spill reflects an increased sensitivity, in both the public and private sectors, to the profound socioeconomic and health effects resulting from catastrophic events. I posit that this response has been catalyzed by an increased awareness of and attention to the need for a sound research and academic base to define and underpin the evolving discipline of disaster medicine and public health preparedness.¹

In June of this year, government, corporate, and academic forces converged in a workshop convened by the Institute of Medicine, entitled *Assessing the Effects of the Gulf of Mexico Oil Spill on Human Health*.² The workshop summary, which brings together expertise from all sectors vital to an effective scientific assessment and informed response, is now available and is highly recommended to our readership.

Included in the Institute of Medicine publication is the work of Dr Lawrence Palinkas and colleagues on the mental health fallout after the *Exxon Valdez* spill.³ This and other studies provide sound evidence of significant increases in generalized anxiety disorder and posttraumatic stress disorder in people who were exposed to the spill. Such work expands our understanding of the more comprehensive public health effects of exposure to oil and related compounds.

This work also adds to the increasing body of knowledge that underscores the importance of mental health considerations in preparing for, responding to, and recovering from catastrophic events. The recently published article in this journal by Dr Irwin Redlener and colleagues demonstrated long-term detrimental mental health effects in children affected by Hurricane Katrina.⁴ This article received broad and much-deserved

media attention. Response to the Gulf oil spill underscores the need for continued increased recognition of mental health as a critical element in disaster preparedness.⁵ This includes the importance of resilience as a requirement of personal and community mental health, which is a primary goal of the National Health Security Strategy.⁶

It is important to remember that the key functions of our journal are to serve as a content source to enhance the academic and research needs of our discipline and to play an active role in supporting the transformation of science into programs and practice. To promote the excellent work cited above, our journal cosponsored a webinar, *Helping Physicians in the Gulf: Recognizing Mental and Behavioral Health Issues in Your Patients*, which can be accessed through the journal Web site (www.dmphp.org). Although targeted toward physicians, this webinar is an educational tool for all primary health care providers to help affected individuals and populations better understand and cope with this tragic event.

As the discipline of disaster medicine and public health preparedness continues to evolve, we need to remind ourselves constantly of the complexities of the events that we address and not let ourselves be deterred by methodological and other constraints that make it difficult to develop the science base for making truly informed policies and decisions in the best interest of patient and population health. It is hoped that the efforts made in response to the Gulf oil disaster will take us to this better place.

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