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A medical student's experience of Nepal earthquake, 2015

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Abstract

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake struck Nepal on April 25, 2015 killing nearly 9,000 people and injured nearly 22,000. The tremor at 11:56 am shook Nepal destroying lives and infrastructures, and most importantly dreams and hopes of people. I, as a medical student, express my experiences and joy of helping person in need during these devastating days.

Keywords: earthquake, medical student, Patan Hospital.

Introduction

A magnitude 7.8 earthquake hit Nepal on April 25, 2015, toppling multi-story buildings in Kathmandu, the capital, and creating landslides and avalanches in the Himalaya Mountains. It killed nearly 8000 people and injured more than 22000 people.¹ It was the worst earthquake in Nepal since the year 1934 A.D. Patan Hospital, a teaching hospital and a leading health institution in the Kathmandu valley, had a key role in managing the victims. The medical students served a vital role in various mass disasters namely, Spanish flu pandemic in 1918,² Kashmir earthquakes in 2005,³ to the Chilean earthquake in 2010⁴ voluntarily despite incomplete training and limited knowledge.⁵

The day, 11:56 AM- It was a regular Saturday for all of us until 11:56 AM until a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Nepal. I got up early, had breakfast and did my daily work. I was getting ready to go to the canteen to have food. Then, came the tremor. I ran out of my room terrified recognizing it as a shake. I hit my arms and legs running and managed to get out but couldn't get out of the gate as the movement kept on increasing. As the movement decreased after a few seconds, I along with friends came out of the gate and could see walls fall on the road. We gathered in the hostel field and I could see the fear on everyone's face. Our try to call loved ones was a failure. We could also feel the tremor again and again during the period. I personally didn't expect it to be so big as I had not experienced any disaster to date. The earthquake shook Nepal destroying many lives and infrastructures and most importantly dreams and hopes of people.

We got a call from the hospital that there are many patients coming injured after the shake. We grabbed our stuff and literally ran to the hospital. A few minutes later, that we reached there, I could see the magnitude of the quake. People were crying in agony of injury and lost lives of their loved ones. I found myself completely lost so as to where to start. The scene there was heart wrecking and finally, I

realized, it was time we had to do what we were good at i.e. save lives. I was still trying to get in touch with my family but didn't succeed. I got back to work. I started to talk to people and what problems they were having and managing them. I applied what I had learned during these years of medical school. When I felt my knowledge was insufficient, I immediately called for help.

It is the worst feeling that I got not being able to get in touch with my family. I felt like crying but I realized I could do something there. A few hours later, I got a call from home, hearing from them was a huge relief. During that time, I came across a mother holding a child. She was crying for help. I tried to check for the carotid pulse of the child but could not find it. I could not believe myself and was left heartbroken. I had come across various dead victims of the quake but this scene shattered me. There were many victims coming continuously. Another incident was that a child was alone sleeping in a corner with no family members around him. He had suffered minor cuts only but was shivering hard. I got blankets from the emergency room and put it over him to comfort the child. The sun was gone and we were still on. There were many aftershocks and felt good that we were brave enough to be with people and help them during this wretched time. I realized then I hadn't taken any food that day except for breakfast and a few cups of water. I felt good it did not stop me from helping people. We were all tired that day, we took some food and went to basic sciences block for sleep. I tried to reflect on myself for the day and felt good that I had done something good and tried to go to sleep. The aftershocks were unhelpful to let us sleep. Some of us friends went back to the emergency room and lend hands-on work. We went to sleep at around 3 AM.

The few days went on being terrified and more importantly doing something to ease people's suffering. I was tired and hungry at times but it was a different energy that drove us all. I thought that the earthquake drill we had volunteered 6-8 months back to be a part of was a lot helpful to teach and more

importantly prepared us for it. It feels great to be a part of a profession that saves the lives of people. At times, we all panicked and felt exhausted, but at the end of the day, when we went to bed, we could smile and get lost in dreams. Yes, this was one of the worst days in the history of Nepal and it taught us all about the experiences we will never forget and lessons to cherish the life.

Life was getting normal after a week of the earthquake, and we had to resume our studies. We were posted to Tilganga Eye Hospital for ophthalmology posting. About 1.5 weeks passed well despite few aftershocks when another huge one-hit Nepal at 12th May, 2015. That day, we were having regular classes on the fourth floor. The tremor was huge. We were all terrified there. We came back to the hospital. The casualties were not that huge as compared to the first one but I felt it will even be more difficult for us to get back to normal life after it. The aftershocks continued and I realized the truth of life that "The show must go on!"

This incident, being my first encounter with mass disaster, was very overwhelming. We worked under our seniors, doctors, and nurses to assist them in procedures, triage the victims, manage the crowd, to contact relatives of victims, and listening and answering questions as appropriate as directed.⁶ Though, being a very overwhelming incident for me, the process was well directed and guided by nurses, seniors, and doctors in every step. I had participated in an earthquake drill organized in Patan Hospital which proved to be very helpful during this incident. From my experience, this drill was the most effective form of resource for first-hand knowledge on mass casualty management, and more such drills on a regular basis would definitely empower medical students. More knowledge of mass disasters and explaining their role through the curriculum should also get them better equipped for such a situation. In these crisis situations, a better delegation of roles and directions for medical students can prove invaluable human resources especially during the initial stages of chaos and limited health care personnel availability.

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Conflict of Interest

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