

Pierre Perrin, MD, MPH, Geneva, Switzerland

Chief Medical Officer of the International Committee of the Red Cross, Geneva Switzerland, academic positions at University of Geneva and at the School of Law and Political Sciences in Aix-Marseille, France associate at the Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA

The HELP-Courses –

19 Years of Successful Training and Networking

Over the last 21 years, there have been major efforts to train health professionals in the management of emergencies. At the beginning of the 1980s, the humanitarian organizations started organizing courses for their personnel, and the ICRC set up a course entitled HELP (Health Emergencies in Large Populations), in conjunction with the WHO and the University of Geneva. The course is based on analysis of practical problems encountered in the field and aims to improve participants' decision-making with regard to public health.

Since the first course in 1986, three strategic orientations have been adopted:

- the first strategy was to decentralize the HELP course and to deliver it in countries close to operational assistance activities in Latin America, Asia, Eastern Europe and Africa,
- the second was to open the HELP course to persons who have experience in humanitarian actions and who occupy decision-making positions, but who do not have professional training in the field of health. This was done to broaden the dialogue about humanitarian assistance and provide non-health professionals with the necessary knowledge to better understand the consequences of health interventions and so to contribute to a better interdisciplinary approach in the field,
- the third strategy was to seek systematic collaboration with public health schools in countries where the HELP course is being delivered. This was done with a view to having the schools take charge of organizing the course and progressively introducing the HELP course into their regular curricula.

While the main purpose of the course remains largely unchanged since its inception, a significant shift in emphasis was made in 1999 when ICRC formalized the legal and ethical components of the course, and created a distinct module called HELP II (Health, Ethics, Law and Policies) in order to sensitize participants to the legal framework in which they are working.

The course is open to all organizations, ministries and institutes that work in humanitarian assistance. So far, 2000 participants, representing 130 different countries, have attended one of the 70 courses delivered throughout 16 different countries. The course is given in three languages: English, French and Spanish. Key academic institutions such as the Johns Hopkins University (USA), the Institut Régional de Santé Publique (Bénin), the Instituto Nacional de Salud Publica de Cuernavaca (Mexico) have introduced the HELP course in their curricula.

An independent evaluation done in 2003 has stated that the course is widely recognized as a course of above-average quality that meets the needs of professionals involved in health emergencies in large populations.