Micro-triage
in the midst of disasters

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Deliberation from a safe distance

Laurie Lipton,
Disasters of war, 2003
Triage = sorting out

• Conventional vs. non-conventional triage  
  (M. Gross, Bioethics in armed conflict, p. 145)
• Simple vs. complex triage
Simple non-conventional triage

- Pre-clinical triage / Macro triage
- Micro triage / clinical triage (micro allocation is the selection for treatment of one patient over another – Winslow, p. 19).
- Post clinical triage
A 10 month old baby was referred to the Israeli military hospital in Haiti for high fever and convulsions. He was evaluated for possible sepsis and meningitis, given anti-convulsive drugs and antibiotics. During the morning after, wheezing and shortness of breath began. He was given anti-asthmatic drugs. A X-ray revealed bilateral infiltrates and enlargement of the heart. An ECG showed ST changes and blood levels of CPK were elevated. Within 24 hours, a diagnosis of acute myocraditis was made. The child's condition kept deteriorating and blood oxygenation fell despite the use of a face mask. It was evident that he was suffering from a self-limiting disease with very good prognosis provided supportive care (=ventilation in the ICU) is provided.
The challenge of micro/clinical triage: it involves violation of the rule of rescue
Triage principles of the Israeli team
Haiti 2010

• Urgency
• Availability of needed resources
• Chances of “success”
• The meta-principle of “dynamic triage” and on-site ethics committees.
Practical examples

• Exclusion criteria
  – Trivially injured
  – Hopelessly injured, including GCS↓, paraplegia, severe head injury.

Homel Dorival, a Vodou doctor
Dilemmas of micro-triage

- Crush injury v. compound fracture
- Compound fracture – amputation or fixation?
- Pneumothorax – hospitalize or discharge?
- Deteriorating patient – fight or give in?
- Symbolic v. biomedical considerations
Hume’s conditions of justice
based on Hubin, Phil Pub Affairs 1979; 9:3-24

- Moderate scarcity of goods
- Limited generosity
- Interdependence
- Rough equality of capacities and aptitudes
- [presumed one-step distribution problem]

solidarity
The key question

Is triage in humanitarian disaster medicine a problem of allocation of scarce health resources (e.g. the Seattle dialysis committees)?
Characteristics of expeditions for disaster relief

• No ulterior greater goal (e.g. win a war)
• No complicating factors (e.g. contagious diseases, terrorism)
• Incomplete duty
• External to the crisis
• Multi-step decisions of justice

The German field hospital in Haiti
Problems with utilitarian triage

- Sometimes too difficult psychologically. (Williams’ argument from personal integrity)
- The paradox of utilitarianism in emergencies: The more acute is the emergency (the more distant we are from “the conditions of justice”), the stronger is the moral justification for utilitarian care (=saving life); but the weaker is the evidence to its value.
• U. of Miami / Project Medishare field hospital in Haiti: 45 amputations / 500 patients
  (MMWR 2011; 59:1676)

• Swiss army surgical team: 1 amputation / 150 patients.
  (Major Gen. Stettbacher, Chief surgeon of the Swiss army)
The choice of a strategy (team? Patient?)

- “Adventurous / hopeful” – compromised
- Standard (closest possible to standard) – one step allocation scheme.
- Safe & decisive
Justice

- Fairness / pure procedural justice
- Desert
- Teleological
Narratives of reasonable care

• Utilitarian triage oriented to the pre-clinical triage of the team.
• Accept only mild compromise of care.
• Commitment to admitted patients is higher than at the door, but lower than in ordinary settings.
Emphasis on second order ethics

• [Ethico-legal debriefing
  – International law
  – The moral ethos of the team (e.g. rights, humanitarianism etc.)
  – The principle of good practice
  – The defense of necessity]
• Knowledge, education and research in mass casualty care and bioethics.
• Ethics committees
• SETTING STANDARDS FOR REPROT & RESEARCH
• Respect for dignity
• Deliberative structure
• “A4R” – like (following Norman Daniels)
• [post factum Balint like safe space for reflection and support]
Antony Gormley, air, sea and earth