

Cambridge academic warns of psychological impact of Haiti earthquake

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(PhysOrg.com) -- A Cambridge academic who is coordinating the mental health response to the Haiti earthquake disaster for one of the first international NGOs into the country warns that mental health needs to be part of the relief plans from the very start.

Dr Lynne Jones, an honorary research associate in Developmental [Psychiatry](#) at the University, is senior mental health adviser for the International Medical Corps and will be going to Haiti on Monday.

She says the IMC plans to send in psychiatrists in the next couple of weeks to do psychological counselling for those severely affected by the disaster. A priority will be paying attention to those who suffer from new mental disorders brought on by acute stress and especially those with preexisting severe disorders who will be particularly vulnerable because of lack of medications and lack of family support.

However, she says that the [mental health issues](#) involved are wider than those suffering from [acute stress](#), adding that if the immediate physical impact of the quake is not dealt with in a psychologically sensitive way it could have long-term consequences.

"Things like burning large numbers of bodies in mass graves are not good for long-term mental health," she says. "Mental health considerations need to be integrated into the other relief work that takes place. It's not just about counselling."

IMC core workers all have training in psychological first aid, which includes empathic listening, paying attention to individual's needs and giving them information, even if it is to say that there is no information or that there will be news on lost relatives in a certain place in x number of days.

Dr Jones has been talking to other relief agencies to coordinate a mental health response to the earthquake.

The IMC, a charity based in California but with medical experts worldwide, was one of the first international relief organisations to have volunteer doctors on the ground and its medical coordinator has been assessing people's needs. It has set up a clinic in central Port-au-Prince which is seeing hundreds of people a day, with the immediate priority being those suffering from physical health problems. It is one of many NGOs that is having logistical problems getting more relief workers into Haiti.

Dr Jones, who has worked on major earthquakes in Aceh and Pakistan, has been sending out guidance to IMC volunteers on mental health issues. "It's basically about reinforcing common sense," she says.

She adds that, in the long term, the presence of international [mental health](#) experts in Haiti may provide an opportunity to improve community services generally. "That is our experience of working in other earthquake disasters such as Aceh," she says.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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