

From the Critical Incident Team

The tragic fire of the Garley Building at Nathan Road broke out at 4:49 p.m. on 20th November 1996. Dr. K.K. Lai of the Hospital Authority Head Office honoured his agreement with the Critical Incident Team by notifying Kitty Wu, the CIT coordinator. Telephone conferences amongst team members were held. By 10 p.m., it was decided that a hotline be set up. The hotline number was announced in the Late News.

Hotline Service

As with our usual practice, the hotline was a collaborative effort with the Auxiliary Medical Services (AMS), and targeted at members of the public who were affected by the incident. This incident turned out to be more disastrous than anyone had anticipated: there were over 39 deaths, there were numerous survivors and bystanders, the fire burnt for 21 hours, and many members of the public were upset by vivid media coverage which included pictures of a burnt man and the descriptions of the victims being incinerated alive.

With the prompt and generous support of Hongkong Telecom, a mobile phone was used in our newly experimented branching system. Unlike the answering machine system or the AMS operator system that we used in former operations, this new system was proven to be effective and efficient. The hotline operated for 12 hours each day from 21st November to 30th November. A total of over 500 callers were handled, as compared to less than a hundred calls to the hotline after the Lan Kwai Fong Incident and the Pat Sin Leng Hill Fire.

Of the 514 callers, 19% were directly involved, 43% were directly affected by the media, 14% showing concern and making general enquiries, 7% enquiries about CP services not related to the present incident, and 17% others.

There are some noteworthy facts about this hotline service:

- Over 50 clinical psychologists, trainees and volunteers offered help in operating this hotline.
- The telephone kept ringing on most days. Our highest record was 110 calls within the 12 hours of operation! Lau-Yu Po-kwan was very exhausted (though very excited) during this period, as she was the key coordinator in the hotline service.

- No prank calls were received this time. All the callers were either seeking advice regarding their emotional reactions, or showing sympathy and concern.
- Hongkong Telecom remains our most appreciated, low-profile allie. The company sponsored mobile phones and free air-time in both the Pat Sin Leng and current hotline service.
- CUHK promptly offered help by providing facilities. Dr. Catherine Tang offered help in coordination even before she went to the airport, while Dr. Patrick Leung was impressively enthusiastic in making the facilities available, shopping for additional telephone sets, and coordinating between the CIT and the trainees. Mr. Raymond Chan, a senior and respected member in the profession returning from Toronto, could not maintain his low profile as he had kindly offered help in both staffing the hotline and supervising the trainees in this operation.

Debriefing for Rescuers

The Team has also organized and coordinated three series of Critical Incident Stress Debriefing for emergency service personnel. The debriefers included Kitty Wu, George Chong, Wong Chee-wing, Mike Wong, Louisa Lee, Helios Lau, Edmond Lau, Florence Kwok, Eugenie Leung, Esther Ng, Mary Wong, and Max Wong.

Since the Lan Kwai Fong Incident, the Team became very focussed on providing debriefing services mainly to the rescuers, which was consistent with the rationale of the original Critical Incident Stress Debriefing model and was proven to be most cost-effective in mobilizing our limited voluntary resources. Debriefings for the public and the survivors were taken up by the Social Welfare Department.

Handling the Media

Kitty Wu and Eugenie Leung were designated as the official spokespersons to handle all the media interviews. A press conference was held with the AMS on the fifth day of the operation, to provide some preliminary statistics about the hotline service, the DCP-AMS collaboration, and the Team's position about how the public was affected by the media coverage.

There were some minor unhappy events about how a radio programme made a mockery of the psychological services after this fire, and also a certain psychologist

misrepresented himself as connected with this DCP project. The Team kept a media watch over this, and had taken some necessary but very conservative actions.

Liaison with Other Departments

We maintained good liaison with the Hospital Authority and the Social Welfare Department so as to ensure that all parties affected, which included the distraught families, injured, bereaved, survivors, rescuers, and members of the public who were affected by the media coverage were cared for.

In their official capacity, our colleagues in the Social Welfare Department, Hospital Authority, and the Royal Hong Kong Police provided psychological services to the affected.

We have also maintained good communication with the Educational Psychologists in the Education Department. They have offered help to students if needed. Besides, because there were horror stories about how teachers used scare tactics in giving students a lesson in fire precautions, we have communicated these to the EPs and they promised to include this topic in their training for teachers.

Letters were sent and received from the Hospital Authority, Auxiliary Medical Services, Social Welfare Department, Fire Services Department, Education Department, Security Branch etc.

Debriefing for Workers

Eddie Li organized a debriefing for the DCP volunteers who had helped in this operation. This is a new attempt to bring a closure to the event and aims at taking care of our own mental health.

A List of Contributors

Sincere appreciation is given to the following DCP members, HKPS members, CP trainees, and CU research assistants who have helped in this operation. Most of these members (and non-members) initiated to call us to offer their help. The Team

strongly believed that without their generous contribution in terms of time and energy, this operation would not have been so successful.

Kitty Wu	Max Wong	Edmond Lau
Eugenie Leung	Jason Chan	Catherine Tang
Lau Yu Po-kwan	C.F. Tsui-Cheish	Patrick Leung
Wong Chee-wing	Rachel Poon	Raymond Chan
Louisa Lee	Shirley Tsang	Sarina Lam
Eddie Li	Sumeer Chan	Sonya Law
Esther Ng	Joseph Lau	Yvonne Lee
Sonia Chang	Flora Leung	Maggie Poon
Sammy Cheng	Ela Chan	Joanne Siu
Connie Wong	Becky Chan	Eric So
Wong Kit-ching	Helios Lau	Winnie Wong
Mike Wong	Alma Au	Queenie Wong
George Chong	Christine Chan	Doris Woo
Mary Wong	Samuel Lo	Yeung Yin-yan
Anita Yuen	Chan Yiu-kee	Melanie Ng
Denise Tsang	Maggie Lau	Winne Shiu
Florence Kwok	William Cheung	Angela Wong
Damaris Hung	Nancy Chan	Maggie Wong
Louise Foo	Tatia Lee	

Once again, this operation has proven one very important point: We could be a very cohesive group when need arises.

Eugenie Leung

on behalf of the Critical Incident Team

8 Feb 1997