

## **Report on actions taken by the Critical Incident Team after the 'Pat Sin Leng' Hill Fire Incident**

At around 11 am on 10.2.1996, a hill fire broke out in Pat Sin Leng and engulfed a group of 50 student hikers from Fung Yiu King Memorial Secondary School led by four teachers and one volunteer. Heroic and selfless actions by the teachers and students managed to herd the majority of the revellers into safety. In the ensuing inferno, however, two teachers and two students died, with nine students receiving different degrees of burn injuries, some very seriously.

Members of the Critical Incident Team (CIT) were alerted to the incident in the afternoon of the same day and a telephone conference was conducted. It was decided that before the full impact of the incident was known, no immediate action was to be taken and the situation would be reviewed on the next day. When the seriousness of the incident began to sink in, the CIT decided to swing into action in the early morning of 11.2.1996, with endorsement from the DCP Chair, Dr. Catherine Tang.

Taking advantage of our close liaison with the Auxiliary Medical Service since the Lan Kwai Fong Incident, the AMS was immediately contacted for a hot-line number and possible venue reservations for Critical Incident Stress Debriefing (CISD) sessions if required. Telephone contact was established with the school principal of Fung Yiu King Memorial Secondary School informing him of our service and the hot-line number. Contacts were also made with the Ambulance Depot of Tai Po and the Civil Aid Service to alert them of our service. The hot-line was officially in operation at 3 pm on 11.2.1996. Callers were asked to leave their contact numbers in an answering machine, and CIT members would ring them back within the next hour for direct counselling. Welfare Department who coordinated front-line debriefing sessions to the school. An understanding was established with regard to the division of labour. Educational psychologists from the Education Department would deal with survivors, the classes of the deceased teachers, and classes that were most affected by the incident. Clinical psychologists from the Social Welfare Department would deal with parents and teachers. School social workers would deal with other students who were not directly involved. Burn victims and their families would be handled by the staff of PWH. It was also agreed that the CIT would have a role in providing hot-line and follow-up service to those affected members of the public not covered in the main-stream services of ED, SWD and PWH.

Up to noon time of 14.2.1996, a total of 40 callers were received from the hot-line service. The callers included those directly affected by the tragedy, members of the public, the mass media, and some prank calls. Concern was raised by the Educational Department regarding the lack of main-stream services during the school holidays which would start on Saturday 17.2.1996. Recognising the importance of the hot-line service, and the fact that many callers were lost by the answer-back system using an answering machine and non-psychological operators, the CIT decided to approach the Hong Kong Telecom for their sponsorship of mobile phones and free air-time. Prompt actions by Hong Kong Telecom meant that two mobile phones with full call-forward, call-waiting and voice mail features were made available on 16.2.1996.

The hot-line number was once again publicised in local newspapers and TV as this would be the only psychological resource during the Chinese New Year holidays. Students, teachers and relatives of FYK School were also notified of the hot-line number before the school broke up on 16.7.1996.

In the morning of Saturday 17.2.1996, the CIT hot-line started to provide a direct-response service by clinical psychologists using two mobile phones with one backing-up the other should the other one was busy. The mobile phone hot-line service would operate between 17.2.1996 and 3.3.1996 inclusive, i.e. until FYK School re-commences on 4.3.1996. Hours of operation were from 9 am to 10 pm everyday. A voice mail service would be activated from 10 pm to 9 am in the next morning. Throughout the entire two-week period, CW Wong would man Mobile One with Eugenie as backup on Mobile Two. Joseph and Esther would stand-by in the event that CW or Eugenie were indisposed.

During the period, Eddie initiated contacts with the Civil Aid Service, the Government Flying Service and the Agricultural and Fisheries Department in case they required debriefing sessions for the rescuers and service personnel. Debriefing sessions for policemen who took part in the rescue were provided by Eddie. An on-site visit was also made by two CIT members on 25.2.1995 to talk to some rescuers at the Agricultural and Fisheries Department, and also informed them of the hot-line numbers. Throughout the holiday period, close contact was maintained with the Education Department, and the media was being closely monitored. Editors of one evening newspaper was sternly cautioned by the CIT when they published a news report which was unnecessarily sensational and perilously detrimental to the psychological healing of survivors. The work of the CIT on the Pat Sin Leng Hill Fire

Incident concluded on 3.3.1996 when the hot-line service came to an end.

The final tally showed that between 11.2.1996 and 3.3.1996, a total of 89 calls were received by the hot-line service. There were 8 mainstream service cases, 34 public callers who were directly or indirectly related with the incident, 22 offers for help, 10 enquiring about psychological services not related to the present incident, and 15 unanswered calls. Out of these 89 calls, 40 were received during the operation of the mobile phones.

Our participation in the Pat Sin Leng Hill Fire Incident provided new insights and invaluable experience to the CIT. Some of the wisdom that managed to condense in the hectic four weeks were as follows:

1. What we have seen in the present operation of the CIT is a high degree of maturity and organisation in the effective handling of the media, in the efficient manning of the hot-line, and in developing close liaison work with other service units. We were impressed by the professional conviction of many of our colleagues who rang the CIT members to offer help even on the very first day of the incident. In this particular case, clinical psychologists and educational psychologists worked hand-in-hand to provide professional services at a time of unprecedented demand.

2. What we have witnessed is also a general maturity of the public in general. Different departments worked harmoniously and in tight coordination throughout the period. There were many callers who rang to offer help, and the mass media had shown a tremendous degree of restraint in their reporting. Sensationalism were kept to a minimum, and positive attitudes were promulgated in the handling of grief and bereavement.

3. We have learned that a hot-line with an answering machine did not work well because many callers were lost in a call-back system. We also realised that the use of mobile phones was a practical and effective way of conducting a hot-line service, and this will probably be the method of choice in our subsequent operations. Callers were not lost after the use of mobile phones. In this connection, a very special thanks should be given to Hong Kong Telecom who generously sponsored two mobile phones with free air-time during the Chinese New Year holidays. Their prompt and efficient response to our needs is a fine example of their commitment to community service .

4. Similar to our Lan Kwai Fong experience, some members of the public were affected psychologically by news reported via the media, especially the television. There were a few calls from rescuers which suggested that CISD may not be available to some sections of the service personnel. The hot-line also managed to net a group of the general public who would not otherwise be served by the main-stream services. These included friends and relatives of the victims, and, quite surprisingly, a group of ex-students of FYK School who had been taught by the deceased teachers. The hot-line service complemented the main-stream services very nicely during the entire period of the operation, especially during the Chinese New Year holidays.

5. Some members of the public rang to enquire for psychological services which were not related to the present incident, showing that there is a need for the public to know where clinical psychology services are available. The incident had also triggered old memories of personal trauma in some of the more vulnerable persons.

6. The CIT was pleased with the work done in the Pat Sin Leng Hill Fire Incident, and considered the present operation a success. The good work that has been done so far, however, would not be possible without the conviction and selfless efforts made by all those people who had helped to make it a success.

Wong Chee Wing

On behalf of the Critical Incident Team, DCP.