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EDITORIAL ARTICLE

The Spanish National Technical Board for Mass Disasters★

La Comisión Técnica Nacional para Sucesos con Víctimas Múltiples en España

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An incident with multiple fatalities exerts pressure on all the systems that make up an emergency preparedness structure, so that it becomes a direct assessment of the degree of preparedness for such events. The involvement of the police and forensic services takes place in conditions that are very different from the ordinary work they are used to, and forces their members to face, under extreme conditions, a chaotic scenario, in which an abnormally large number of cases is combined with a minimum amount of evidence. All of this is combined with maximum pressure from the media and political decision-makers, where the attention to the relatives and their natural demands must receive a response of the highest level of quality.¹

In February 2009, consistent with the importance of coordination between different bodies, the Ministry of the Presidency published Royal Decree 32/2009, approving the "National Protocol for Forensic Medical and Scientific Police action in events with multiple victims."² With this regulation, the administration sought to regulate the technical assistance to be provided for the correct identification of corpses and the determination of the causes and circumstances of death. Its articles establish a mechanism for action, under the direction of the judicial authority, in which forensic science, regardless of its nature, and the State Security Forces and Corps, coordinate harmoniously with each other, within the framework of civil protection plans, to offer a high level scientific response that avoids

dysfunctions and duplications that would be extremely harmful in these scenarios.

Among the new features introduced by this Royal Decree is the creation of the National Technical Commission for Multiple Victim Incidents (CTNSVM for its initials in Spanish) as a collegiate body under the Ministry of Justice and attached to the former Directorate General for Relations with the Administration of Justice, now the Directorate General for the Public Justice Service. The fundamental characteristic of this commission is the joint participation of the medical and legal bodies and representatives of the different State Security Forces and Corps. In fact, its presidency is rotating and every 2 years the posts of president and vice-president of the commission alternate between the Directorate General for the Public Justice Service and the former Directorate General of the Police and Civil Guard. Currently, the presidency is held by the Chief Colonel of the Criminalistics Service of the Guardia Civil.

In the composition of the commission, the autonomous communities are incorporated through the autonomous police (Mossos d'Esquadra, Ertzaintza, Policía Foral) and the representatives of the forensic medical profession, which usually coincides with the management of an Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences (IMLCF for its initials in Spanish). The activities of the commission are recorded in biennial minutes, accessible on the Internet portal of the Ministry of Justice.³ Throughout its 12 years of existence,

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the CTNSVM has met in plenary on 17 occasions, most of them in a face-to-face format, although during the pandemic it was necessary to resort to a telematic format at the 16th session, held on 15 December 2020.

One of the most fruitful activities of the commission has been the review of actual actions in multi-victim incidents in which its members have participated. These include the train accident in Angrois, with 80 fatalities, the accident at the Los Llanos military air base (Albacete), with 11 fatalities of various nationalities, the Germanwings plane crash in Seyne (Les Alpes) in 2015, with 150 fatalities, and the events that occurred in Catalonia in August 2017, with 24 fatalities, including the terrorists. Other smaller participations have also served to activate the protocol and have been reviewed by the CTNSVM, such as the train accident in Castelldefels, the earthquake in Lorca, or the floods in Majorca in 2018, with 13 deaths.

The commission's main activities also include the participation of its members in various drills and training exercises, either its own (tabletop exercises) or in the framework of joint activities with Civil Protection authorities or the Military Emergency Unit, such as the Ebola drill in the port of Barcelona (2015), the exercises carried out with the Military Emergency Unit in Cantabria (2017), Murcia (2018) and Jaca (2019), or the EU Riwaterex international exercise (2018).

The various working groups that have been set up within the committee have dealt with technical coordination problems identified during exercises and real-life scenarios. These working groups included the following:

- Recommendations on selection, treatment, coding, destruction and conservation of remains and samples.
- Rules for the distribution of samples for analysis among the different forensic laboratories.
- Drafting of a collaboration agreement with NGOs on the identification of corpses of deceased persons in migratory transit.
- Review of the IMLCF action plans.

In addition to the working groups, the commission has carried out other activities, such as the preparation of an information guide on the functions of forensic doctors and the Forensic Science Police established in their action protocol. This guide was approved by the plenary and published by the publications service of the Ministry of Justice.⁴

The convenience of having a rapid intervention group of professionals was detected, made up of people with specialised knowledge in those areas that may be most necessary in an IMLCF depending on the type of emergency. This group was set up in 2020 and is made up of sections related to the most relevant identification tasks (anthropology, odontology, prosecution, genetics, etc.).

For all these reasons, the CTNSVM has proved to be a useful tool for establishing protocols and coordination mechanisms between different bodies in order to prepare for and respond to incidents with multiple fatalities that exceed the capacities of local arrangements. Its role as a tool for interpreting the protocol established in RD 32/2009 has proven to be effective when tested in real emergency situations with multiple victims, as evidenced by its participation in events over the years of its existence.

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