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SPECIAL ARTICLE

Valencia's DANA of October 2024: The 12 days of the state of emergency in the province of Valencia (Spain)



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Abstract On October the 29th of 2024, the province of Valencia suffered one of the most devastating events because of the DANA meteorological phenomenon that destroyed several towns in L'Horta Sud. For a period of 12 days, the state of emergency was decreed and the forensic doctors of the Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences of Valencia, together with the rest of the professionals, actively participated in the tasks of removing bodies, identifying and delivering bodies to relatives in a totally exceptional situation.

Perfect teamwork, Head of Justice, forensic doctors, officials of Management and Processing Assistance Corps, Physicians, laboratory assistants and technicians, autopsy assistants, psychologists, social workers, Legal Medicine residents, funeral company workers, cleaning workers, City of Justice cafeteria service, National Police, Civil Guard, Military Emergency Unit and informatic workers.

The physical and mental over exertion of all who participated under the orders of the Director of the Institute of Legal Medicine resulted in an exquisite work where values beyond the purely professional emerged. After 12 days of intense work, almost 200 victims of the catastrophe were fully identified and 200 families partially comforted and consoled. That's the real meaning of our work.

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PALABRAS CLAVE

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Desastres

La DANA de Valencia de octubre de 2024: los 12 días del estado de emergencia en la provincia de Valencia (España)

Resumen El día 29 de octubre de 2024, la provincia de Valencia (España) sufrió uno de los sucesos más devastadores como consecuencia del fenómeno meteorológico DANA, que asoló varias poblaciones de L'Horta Sud. Durante un periodo de 12 días se decretó el estado de emergencia, y los médicos forenses del Instituto de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses

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de Valencia, junto con el resto de los profesionales, participaron activamente en las tareas de levantamiento de cadáveres, identificación y entrega de cuerpos a los familiares en una situación totalmente excepcional.

Fue un perfecto trabajo en equipo: Dirección General de Justicia, médicos forenses, funcionarios de cuerpos de Auxilio, Gestión y Tramitación, facultativos, auxiliares y técnicos de laboratorio, auxiliares de autopsia, psicólogos, trabajadores sociales, residentes de medicina legal, trabajadores de empresas funerarias, trabajadores de la limpieza, servicio de cafetería de la Ciudad de la Justicia, Policía Nacional, Guardia Civil, Unidad Militar de Emergencias e informáticos.

El sobreesfuerzo físico y mental de todos los que colaboraron bajo las órdenes de la Dirección del Instituto de Medicina Legal y Ciencias Forenses de Valencia tuvo como resultado un trabajo exquisito, donde afloraron valores más allá de lo puramente profesional. Tras 12 días de intenso trabajo, casi 200 víctimas de la catástrofe quedaron completamente identificadas y 200 familias a las que se pudo reconfortar y consolar parcialmente. Este es el verdadero sentido de nuestra profesión.

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In the early hours of 30 October, at around 1 am, a call is made to the mobile phone of the forensic doctor on duty: a flash flood in the town of Paiporta has caused an initially unknown number of deaths. In the middle of the night, the judicial commission travels to the town in the midst of uncertainty. Fortunately, the disaster coordinator, a forensic doctor from the Institute of Legal Medicine and Forensic Sciences of Valencia (IMLCFV), is part of the delegation. A major flood has inundated several towns in the southern part of the province of Valencia, and the death toll is expected to be high. At 4.50 a.m., the various forensic medicine teams of the IMLCFV are activated, and preparations made for a possible state of emergency: representatives of the government delegation and the Directorate General of Justice, the Directorate of the IMLCFV in charge of major disasters, representatives of the security forces and the heads of the services of the Institute of Forensic Medicine meet at the IMLCFV. The Director of the Institute and the Head of the Security Forces, after informing the competent judicial authority in accordance with Article 5, agree to immediately apply Royal Decree 32/2009 of 16 January, which approves the National Protocol for Forensic Medical and Scientific Police Action in Events with Multiple Victims.¹

The teams responsible for the recovery of the bodies and their areas of operation are identified, and temporary and permanent morgues are set up at the IMLCFV, along with their areas of operation (reception, identification of bodies, preservation, and storage). The two areas for assistance to family members and for the collection of ante-mortem data will be staffed by forensic doctors, together with representatives of the state security forces and corps, and located at the Guardia Civil headquarters and at the Police headquarters. The data integration centre, consisting of a forensic office and an office of the State Security Forces, is physically located in one of the training rooms of the IMLCFV.

Meanwhile, before 7 a.m., the first forensic doctors arrive at the IMLCFV workroom, where they begin to organise and check the necessary equipment, including

backpacks, protective gear, disposable materials, documentation, and attachments, at all times following the guidelines of the Royal Decree, with which they are very familiar thanks to their experience with the fire that occurred in February of this year. On the 22nd of February 2024, a fire broke out in a residential complex of 138 flats in the Campanar district of Valencia. It was considered the worst fire ever recorded in the city, as the flames engulfed the entire building, leaving 10 people dead and 15 injured, the worst disaster to hit the city of Valencia since the metro accident in 2006.

At 9:30 a.m., the first teams to recover the dead are organised, consisting of a forensic doctor accompanied by another forensic doctor, a laboratory technician, or a psychologist, and distributed over geographical areas of Paiporta, Torrente, Alfafar, Massanasa, Picaña, Mislata-Xirivella, La Torre, Catarroja, L'Alcudia, Requena, and Alzira. Each team has a code that must be noted on all documents. The hearses and transport vehicles arrive at the IMLCFV basement car park to pick up the different teams that are ready to leave.

The Advanced Command Post (PMA) is located at a petrol station at the entrance to one of the affected towns (Paiporta). From there, the rescue teams will coordinate with the police to collect the bodies. At around 10:30 in the morning, the first emergency vehicles set off. The scene is terrifying: barely 300 m separate land from water, the city from the apocalypse. The scene in the affected areas is devastating: overturned and crushed vehicles, mud, reeds, and a few disoriented survivors on the motorway suggesting that something major has happened. Access was difficult, with water, mud, and sludge impeding the passage of vehicles and pedestrians. Telephone lines are down and throughout the day the task of locating the deceased is difficult and dangerous, often led by confused citizens and family members. Night falls, and it is time to return to the IMLCFV. It is difficult to explain what was seen and experienced during these first hours. The first day ends

with 62 bodies recovered, 88 more the next day, 13 and 16 on the third and fourth days, and so on until a total of 195 bodies were recovered in the first week and 212 in the 12 days that the emergency teams were there.

From the moment the disaster struck, the collaboration of forensic doctors from other regions of Spain was overwhelming. Those from Murcia, Cartagena, and Alicante arrived on the scene in the early hours of the morning, forming new teams to recover bodies and help with the first autopsies. For almost two weeks, colleagues continued to arrive from all over Spain: Murcia, Alicante, Catalonia, Toledo, Ciudad Real, Cáceres, Badajoz, Málaga, Albacete, Castellón, Granada, Madrid, the Balearic Islands, etc. Many forensic doctors and autopsy assistants had volunteered to help in an altruistic and selfless way. Retired colleagues, who wanting to provide physical and emotional support, also took part.

For 12 days, the work is meticulously organised under the direction of the IMLCFV management and the disaster coordinator. Every day at 7:00 a.m., a meeting is held in the classroom to organise and distribute the rescue teams that go out every day, accompanied by the National Police and the Guardia Civil. A total of 141 recovery teams from Valencia and other Spanish provinces work together over the 12 days of the emergency, carrying out basic procedures such as determining the cause of death, examining the bodies, taking photographs, labelling and collecting personal belongings, filling in and completing forms and appendices, bagging objects and identifying each body with a code.

Every day, before 8:00 a.m., the temporary storage facility in the basement of the IMLCFV, where the body reception area is located, is activated. The reception team carefully examines, classifies, and arranges the documents that accompany each deceased person, and order each procedure to be carried out: drawing up a post-mortem report, radiological examination, regulated forensic autopsy, collection of personal effects, taking samples for genetic studies, and completing a dental record. Each procedure is accompanied by a fully completed annex. Quality control involves checking that all procedures have been completed and organised, and only then is the body transferred to the area for preservation and storage in the final repository.

Activity in the autopsy rooms of the Pathology Service is frenetic and intense every day, without compromising the rigour and treatment that the bodies deserve. Six teams of doctors and assistants, organised by the Head of Pathology, work simultaneously in the usual autopsy room and in an additional room set up in the IMLCFV car park by the Military Emergency Unit. Autopsy assistants, forensic doctors, laboratory technicians, medical staff, civil servants, funeral parlour staff, the Civil Guard, and the National Police all work together with the same aim: to determine the cause of death and to try to identify the victims. Everything is done and recorded according to protocol. On 30 October, 19 autopsies are carried out, 83 more on the second working day, 56 on the third, and 20 more on the fourth. A total of 178 autopsies were carried out in the four days following the disaster, with 212 autopsies completed during the entire state of emergency.

In the two areas of assistance to families and collection of ante-mortem data, which will later be extended to the

towns of Albal, Alfafar, and Algemesí, the relatives of those missing come forward with photographs, dental records, lists of personal belongings, clothing, prosthetic devices, surgical procedures, and other information relevant to the identification. The security forces are responsible for receiving reports of missing persons, while forensic doctors were responsible for interpreting medical reports and health data, as well as coordinating the collection of biological samples. The information contained in each file is forwarded to the Data Integration Centre.

The Data Integration Centre (CID), located in Classroom 1 of the IMLCFV Training Centre and made up of forensic doctors, the Civil Guard, and the National Police, begins to operate actively. Once the information has been processed, an identification report is drawn up and sent to the judicial authorities. The information provided by family members and acquaintances is shared and updated minute by minute in the ante-mortem offices, the information collected at the time of the removal of the deceased, data obtained during the forensic autopsy, the results of the post-mortem examination, the radiological study, the dental records, and any other information that allows for the accurate identification of each of the deceased, the final result of a puzzle in which all the pieces fitted together. In order to provide the media with up-to-date, reliable, and regular information on the event, the data are forwarded to the press officer of the High Court of Justice of the Valencian Community.

The number of deceased exceeds the reception capacity of the IMLCFV, and the initial action plan requires the final storage and post-mortem equipment, initially located in the basement of the IMLCFV, to be transferred to the Valencia Exhibition Centre. There is perfect coordination with the Military Emergency Unit, which established the work areas (reception, preparation, and delivery) in an orderly manner. Respect for the deceased and their families is a constant throughout the entire operation, and camaraderie is the order of the day among the forensic doctors, assistants, and all the workers of the Emergency Medical Unit. The identification of each of the victims has completed thanks to the work by forensic dentists from Valencia and the rest of Spain, and thus, each of the bodies, together with their personal belongings, are carefully delivered one by one to their families through funeral companies.

11 November, 20:00, 12 days after the disaster. The teams dedicated to the DANA are deactivated and returned to "normal", and the IMLCFV resumes its usual activities. After 12 days of intense work, almost 200 victims of the disaster have been identified, and 200 families have been provided with some comfort and reassurance. The General Directorate of Justice, forensic doctors, emergency services, management and administrative staff, medical assistants and laboratory technicians, autopsy assistants, psychologists, social workers, specialists in forensic medicine, funeral parlour staff, cleaning staff, the cafeteria of the City of Justice, the National Police, the Guardia Civil, the Military Emergency Unit, and IT specialists have worked together in perfect harmony. A sense of duty well done, of having fulfilled our mission to society and to ourselves. And, in the shadows, we return to our usual routines, although we will never be the same.

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Conflict of interest

The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

Reference

1. Real Decreto 32/2009, de 16 de enero, por el que se aprueba el Protocolo nacional de actuación Médico-forense y de Policía Científica en sucesos con víctimas múltiples. Boletín Oficial del Estado, 6 de febrero de 2009, núm. 32. p. 12630–73. Available in: <https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2009/01/16/32>.