



## China's Sichuan Earthquake: Role of a Medical Library in the Immediate Recovery Process - Insights and Observations

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper will explain the planning and delivery of information services provided by the Medical Library of Chinese PLA (Peoples Liberation Army) to China's Sichuan Earthquake hit areas. On May 12, 2008, a major earthquake devastated the Wenchuan County in China's Sichuan province. Tens of thousands of people were killed and hundreds of thousands were injured as a result of the quake. Suddenly millions of people became homeless. The quake also destroyed thousands of buildings as well as essential infrastructure, and cut the affected areas off from the outside world. Disaster relief and rescue efforts were right away underway. In the early days of the disaster, providing food, water and basic sanitary facilities were the biggest challenges. Simultaneously, the control and prevention of epidemic diseases became the most important and urgent task. Delivering appropriate health education information was deemed essential and helpful for prevention and control of epidemic diseases. So, in the evening of May 12, the Medical Library of Chinese PLA quickly acted and organized a team of capable medical librarians to begin timely services to provide health information. In less than 2 days, the library compiled and printed instructional brochures on how to deal with sanitary problems and prevent possible diseases. The instructional handbooks were quickly sent to Sichuan quake areas on the evening of May 14th. The library also sent two medical librarians to the earthquake areas to help the on site medical teams. In addition, more and more volunteers were pouring in from all over China to assist. In order to educate the*

*volunteers, the library set up a website to provide useful and appropriate health information on the Internet. The library also provided free earthquake-related document delivery services to all the people. The planning and implementation of these services were extremely useful and because of that our library received much appreciation from the public. In addition to explaining our experiences, this paper will also present some insights and suggestions for medical librarians on how to enhance service capabilities in case of public disasters and emergencies.*

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## **Full text**

### 1. Introduction

On May 12, 2008, a major earthquake devastated the Wenchuan County in China's Sichuan province. Tens of thousands of people were killed and hundreds of thousands were injured as a result of the quake. Suddenly millions of people became homeless. The quake also destroyed thousands of buildings as well as essential infrastructure, and cut the affected areas off from the outside world. Disaster relief and rescue efforts were right away underway.

Chinese librarians took actively in disaster relief and rescue, not only by donating and taking care of the injured, but also by quickly providing medical information services to the earthquake ravaged areas.

In the early days of the disaster, providing food, water and basic sanitary facilities were the biggest challenges. Simultaneously, the control and prevention of epidemic diseases became the most important and urgent task. To provide health education information would be very helpful for epidemic prevention. Our library, the Medical Library of Chinese PLA, focused on its medical nature and specialty, quickly acted and provided a series of timely medical information services to the earthquake ravaged areas.

### 2. Several measures taken by our library

#### 2.1 Acted rapidly and deliberated measures

Several hours after the tragic catastrophe, the leaders and experts of our library, the Medical Library of Chinese PLA, quickly acted. In the evening of May 12<sup>th</sup>, 2008, our library quickly

organized a team of capable medical librarians to provide medical information services. The library leaders and the staff of this special task team hold an urgent meeting and deliberated measures we should take.

We analyzed the actually situation of this devastating earthquake and the aspects of medical information needs for the quake-stricken areas in the early stage of post-disaster. Delivering appropriate health education information was deemed essential and helpful for prevention and control of epidemic diseases. Then we decided to take several immediate measures to provide medical information services, including compiling and printing instructional brochures on how to deal with sanitary problems and prevent possible diseases, to set up a website to provide useful and appropriate health information on the Internet, to provided free earthquake-related document delivery services to all the people, and etc.

2.2 Decided what kind of medical information was the most needed, ways and means on how to provide, and the time limit

First, we analyzed what kind of medical information was in urgent need for the quake-stricken areas in the early stage of post-disaster. The medical relief and epidemic prevention were the two most important tasks in the early stage of post-disaster. The first-line health care workers carried out medical relief immediately, taking advantage of existing professional knowledge and skills. During the emergent rescue stage, their needs for medical information were not highlighted. While on the other hand, after powerful natural disasters, if not effectively carry out water conservation, environmental disinfection, food sanitation and infectious disease prevention and control work, the potential occurrence and prevalence of infectious diseases will happen.

To achieve "no pandemic after the disaster", we should not only provide professional knowledge to the health workers responsible for disease prevention and control, but also provide health education information to the victims, volunteers and non-medical rescue personnel. This kind of information was particularly urgent and important in post-disaster early stage. So, the leaders and experts of our library decided to compile and print instructional brochures on how to deal with sanitary problems and prevent possible diseases.

Second, we analyzed the ways and means on how to provide information services to earthquake hit areas. The quake destroyed most essential infrastructure. Traffic and communications were interrupted. Modern ways and means to provide information services, which are based on networks and electronic devices, became totally inaccessible in the post-disaster early stage. How to disseminate instructional brochures to front-line rescue personnel and victims? Meanwhile, rescue teams were assaulting to the stricken area. Under such special conditions at that time, we could contact and depend on mobile rescue teams to disseminate instructional brochures.

Therefore, our library quickly contacted the Chengdu Military Region Center for Disease Control and Prevention, not only to confirm the information needs for affected areas in the post-disaster early stage, but also to ask for their cooperation and coordination to disseminate our brochures. The disease prevention experts gave us rapid reply, totally agreed and commended our plan, and also gave us some suggestions on the instructional brochure plan.

### 2.3 Organized keen-witted and capable librarians

Our library organized a team of 11 experienced, keen-witted and capable medical librarians, 9 of which have biomedical sciences background. The team members had a deep understanding of the importance of providing medical information to the quake-stricken areas. From the early morning of May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2008 until the early morning of next day, our librarians of this special task team kept working without rest. Their dedication, cooperation and professional competence produced outstanding results.

### 2.4 Edited and Printed instructional brochures on how to deal with sanitary problems and prevent post-disaster diseases

We first retrieved various kinds of literature, including monographs, reference books, periodicals and reports etc. After analysis and integration, we organized the instructional brochure by seven sections, including water sanitation, food hygiene, environmental sanitation, common or communicable diseases in earthquake-stricken areas, mental health, self rescue and mutual rescue, intoxicant hazard and poisoning control. In each section, we integrated the most convenient and common tips to deal with sanitary problems and prevent post-disaster diseases. We also consulted the experts who were working in the General Hospital of Chinese PLA and the Academy of Military Medical Sciences. The experts censored the information contents of each section and thus the quality and professional correctness of the instructional brochure was ensured.

After 24 hours' continuous working, the members of this special task team finished the draft of the instructional brochure. Then the draft was censored by two experienced journal editors. After that, the instructional brochure was printed quickly.

### 2.5 Dispatched two experienced librarians to quake-stricken areas

In order to disseminate the instructional brochures in the fastest speed, our library dispatched two experienced librarians to quake-stricken areas right after the brochures were printed. On the afternoon of May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008, two experienced librarians, including me, which both had medical sciences background, carrying the printed instructional brochures and the love of all our librarians, flied to quake-stricken areas. On the midnight of May 14<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the instructional brochures were sent to the earthquake relief headquarters. Our instructional brochure was the first health education material in quake-stricken areas. The earthquake relief headquarters highly commended our work.

At that time, the rescue teams continued assaulting to the stricken area. Our instructional brochures were sent to the rescue teams. The members in rescue teams were willing to know important health education information on how to deal with sanitary problems and prevent post-disaster diseases. On the other hand, along their way to rescue, they disseminated the instructional brochures to the victims, the general public and the volunteers. They all thought the health education information was really essential and helpful for prevention and control of common or epidemic diseases.



## 2.6 Provided on-site information services in front line

Two experienced librarians who were sent to the quake-stricken areas took the initiative to contact first-line health workers and provided on-site information services in front line. First-line health workers who were carrying out epidemic prevention work need some professional knowledge on how to deal with toxic hazards. Fortunately, the telephone communications had just been recovered. We communicated immediately with colleagues in Beijing, asked them to do literature retrieval and analysis, and then provide evidence-based knowledge point to the first-line health workers.

Second, we found that the instructional brochure had two disadvantages. This handbook was not so easy to carry. Its content was not so easy to understand and memorize for the general public. So we edited a single sheet leaflet, condensed the most important information which the general public should know first concerning how to deal with sanitary problems and prevent post-disaster diseases. We printed vast copies of the leaflet and distributed to the general public. The leaflet was also highly praised by the earthquake relief headquarters and the general public.

## 2.7 Deepened and expanded our medical information services

In the early stage of post-disaster, more and more volunteers were pouring from all over China into the Sichuan affected areas to assist. In order to educate the volunteers, the library set up a Wenchuan earthquake specific website to provide useful and appropriate health information on the Internet. We organized related information of this website in several sections, including medical rescue and treatment, common diseases and epidemic prevention, mental health, related guidelines, hot topics and latest developments etc.

In our website, we not only collected related medical literature from traditional academic monographs, reference books, periodicals and reports. We also collected various types of medical information from the mainstream media, including television, newspapers and various.

The library also provided free earthquake-related document delivery services to all the people.

### 3. Valuable Insights

The planning and implementation of these services were extremely useful and because of that our library received much appreciation from the public. Most public disasters and emergencies are related to medical care and diseases prevention. This requires our medical libraries enhance the capabilities of medical information services to support public disasters and health emergencies. So, in addition to explaining our experiences, the author wants to present some insights and suggestions for medical librarians on how to enhance service capabilities in case of public disasters and emergencies.

#### 3.1 To be acuminous minded and strengthen the initiative to provide information services

During the SARS epidemics in the year of 2003, Chinese medical libraries and information institutions did not act actively and exposed deficiency in providing timely medical information services. Fortunately, Chinese medical libraries realized this kind of deficiency and kept attempting to improve the capabilities of medical information services to support public disasters and health emergencies.

During the following epidemics, such as avian influenza, freezing disasters, food poisoning and hand-foot-mouth disease etc, Chinese medical libraries achieved growing capabilities of medical information services to support public health emergencies.

We found that Chinese medical libraries did a good job in responding to public health emergencies, but still exposed some kind of deficiency in providing timely medical information services to non-public-health emergencies, such as natural disasters, social security incidents and some public incidents. Therefore, we should be more sensitive to various non-public-health emergencies, be acuminous minded, strengthen the initiative to provide information services and therefore respond quickly to non-public-health emergencies.

#### 3.2 To establish a mechanism of medical information services to respond emergencies

Medical libraries should establish a mechanism of medical information services to respond emergencies. Medical information services to respond emergencies may include organizing and producing health education materials, establishing a dedicated website, providing evidence-based knowledge point, document delivery and literature translation etc. These services may involve almost all the library departments' participation and cooperation.

We can set up a team responsible for providing medical information services in emergencies.

In order to efficiently train and administrate this team during usual time, the leaders of medical libraries can apply methods of tacit knowledge management. For example, to establish an incentive mechanism, that is, to award the members who have responded rapidly in case of emergencies, who have made reasonable suggestions, or who have made outstanding contributions in providing medical services in emergencies. We can also set up a mechanism to let the team members discuss thoughts, exchange skills and let their experiences interflow between the team.

On the other hand, we should pay attention to establish a good communication mechanism and a good relationship with the health authorities and the medical personnel who will carry

out medical care and diseases prevention as well. In this way, in case of emergencies, disasters or incidents, we can communicate with them, know about latest information, and make the right decision.

### 3.3 To cultivate capable and excellent librarians

As we mentioned above, we can set up a team responsible for providing medical information services in emergencies. This team should involve capable, dedicated, cooperative and excellent professional librarians in various departments, nominate one or two team leaders, and make the responsibility and function clear. The library should also pay much attention to cultivate the cooperation spirit of team members. For librarians themselves, they should develop and enhance the capacity of information process, including the perceived ability of information needs and the ability of forecast, acquisition, evaluation, analysis, process and transmission needed information.