A 23 year follow up of bereaved parents after a military accident

The Vassdalen snow avalanche in 1986

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Agenda:

- The background for the accident
- The casualties
- The intervention and support to the bereaved families
- The follow-up at one, two, five and 23 years
- Results and discussion
The Background for the accident

- A military winter exercise, Anchor Express, where 23,000 troops (NATO) participated
- 31 Norwegian soldiers, (2 NCO and 28 conscripts) were hit by a snow avalanche
- All were partly or completely buried
- 16 soldiers died within minutes.
- The survivors themselves sounded the alarm
The background for the accident

- Northern Norway is a mountainous area, with deep valleys and a hash shifting climate
- It has an extensive military presence, large military exercises are common
- Due to heavy snowfall a new track had been selected for the engineer platoon
- The new track would give the advancing battalion a clear strategic advantage
The cause of the accident.

- New snow fell during the last 3 days before the accident
- Shifting winds with up to 20 m/s
- Temperature on March 5th was appx -10 degrees Centigrade, with a wind-chill factor of appx -50 degrees
- The mountain side was a steep slope with a fall from 470m to appx 220m
- A slab avalanche broke loose with a velocity of max. 128 km/h, the avalanche contained appx 20 000m3
The casualties

- 14 conscripts and 2 NCO`s between 19 and 26 years of age died
- The causes of death were established by way of autopsies, performed on 10 out of the 16
- The primary cause was asphyxia generally caused by compression by the snow with acute circulatory and respiratory failure
Death notification

- The brigade had 9 confirmed deaths at 1945 hours on March 5th
- Messages of death were initiated and 9 bereaved families were informed during the night or during the early hours of the following day
- The remaining 7 bereaved families were informed and deaths confirmed the following days as the dead were found and identified
- Death notification were done primarily by local clergy
Clinical and research considerations

- A clinical evaluation of all available information on the families’ immediate coping
- A subsequent follow up over at least a three year period
- A personal visit by the brigade psychiatrist after one year, question: how did the bereavement process develop?
- A later follow up by means of telephone and questionnaire
The intervention and support

- The accident was declared a national tragedy
- All parents were invited to the HQ of the Division in northern Norway
- They met both local and national leaders
  - the Brigade commander
  - the Defence and Prime minister
  - the Commander in chief of the Norwegian Armed Forces, King Olav V
The intervention and support
Main principles.

- The families were treated as a closed group
- They were transported together and shared living areas during the visit
- The families were encouraged to communicate with one another and to share information
- Support personnel were available for individual consultations, both clergy and medical personnel plus regular army officers
- Information was given to the group as a whole
- Informed about a structured follow up
Confrontational support

- The bereaved met the survivors and were free to ask them whatever they wanted
- The families visited the barrack and the rooms where their sons had lived
- A viewing of the dead was organised
- The families were encouraged to keep contact with one another after their departure
- They were at a later stage transported to the scene of the accident
The follow up

1987 - A personal visit to all the bereaved families in their home. Clinical interview and two questionnaires; GHQ and ETID

1988 - Questionnaires and telephone contact

1991 - Questionnaires and telephone contact

2009 - Clinical interview; GHQ, ETIG and IES-R
32 parents present at Bardufoss in 1986

- 4 parents refused to participate

28 parents examined in 1987

- 8 parents dead by 2009
- 4 parents refused to participate

20 parents alive in 2009

16 bereaved parents participated in the study (2009).
Lessons learned I

- Unanimous acceptance of the early interventions
- The sum of early interventions created a common understanding of the accident
- First two years were intensive grief period
- Non had a clear psychiatric disorder caused by the loss
Lessons learned II

- Confronting support could not prevent the development among a few parents of a divergent views of the cause of events. This led to a decade long struggle for acceptance of their view of the accident. For those concerned the inability to come to terms with the loss prolonged the grief period.
Lessons learned for leaders

• You must be seen as competent on accident analysis

• You must have a capacity for empathic communication

• You must be Open Honest Independent