Emergencies have always called for the most efficient operational capacities, with fast response being the core paradigm. The best preparation comes from prior scenario clarification, prior operational planning, ready-made tool-kits, regular drills and the most efficient instant response: alert, mobilise, rush and save. When you hear the siren, it is no longer the time to think, to question the rules of engagement. It’s time to act and apply what you know, what you have been trained for. This is the ultimate strength of our emergency teams: ready to rush, ready to save.

The last decades of the 20th Century showed that we had to strengthen these abilities considerably. The scale and complexity of disasters increased steadily, with more infrastructure to destroy and many more people to kill. We had to prepare more comprehensive plans and more developed organisational responses. Modern countries had to prepare for large operational theatres, with many bodies acting together for very long periods, under the severe scrutiny of the media.

But the 21st Century opens a new era. Increasingly, we are faced with: a qualitative jump in severity (for example the December 2004 Tsunami and the Madrid attacks); a shift from uncertainty to ignorance (Prions, mutating viruses and potential pandemics); a shift from site accidents to network domino effects (continental black-outs, such as in the US and Canada, August 2003); globalisation and speed of spread (the SARS contamination, the conjunction of unknown virus, air travel and hubs worldwide); unthinkable effects in globally interdependent societies with new vulnerable textures (the heat waves, for instance); and, most disturbingly of all, the inconceivable (the age of hyper-terrorism, when some have voluntarily chosen to embrace the universe of death).

This is an age of total surprise, strategic traps, and operational swamps. Naturally, rescuers have still to rush, save and solve. But in order to save, they must stay alive. And to solve, they must address emerging issues, not ones that prevailed previously, in a former age. The command is crystal clear, “Do not fight the last war”.

Unprepared
Let’s remember 1914. General Bachelet said: “We marched into the industrial era with the agrarian mindset of the previous age”. To quote one of his British colleagues: “We were caught totally unprepared. In 1940, we were fully prepared – for the First World War”. The “9/11” Commission Report echoes these comments: “[t] was different from anything the Government had faced before”. Essential gaps were underlined: “We believe that the 9/11 attacks revealed four kinds of failure: in imagination, policy, capabilities, and management.” The Commission clarifies the structural problem: “Imagination is not a gift...”

Crossing the Rubicon

This is an age of total surprise, strategic traps and operational swamps, say Dr Patrick Lagadec and Professor Pierre Carli. New global challenges mean a looming watershed in emergency response and critical care strategies.
Global challenge

This global challenge indicates a looming watershed in emergency response and critical care strategies.

The French organisation, which has proven its most advanced efficiency on many occasions, can be used as a good example of the crucial need of a fresh approach. Pre-hospital emergency services provide an example for the ongoing breakdown of traditional strategies. The French system, started more than 30 years ago, consists of a chain of care from the site of the catastrophe to the hospital. The system has two essential features. The first is the establishment of an advanced medical post (AMP) near the site in which medical teams can be mobilized rapidly to start emergency treatment upon triage. The second feature is the medical controlled dispatch system, which can direct patients not just to the nearest hospital, but to all available medical facilities, whether they be close or far away from the disaster site.

The immediate pre-hospital emergency response following a disaster is called the Red Cross. When traditional responses no longer fit, the challenge is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know what it is about, risks and crises cross the Rubicon – ie follow and, ultimately, is to know 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