

Tsunamis took toll on CDC staff: Carnage haunts hardened disease sleuths
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1331 words
16 February 2005
The Atlanta Journal – Constitution

Bangkok, Thailand --- The first sign that something was wrong came during breakfast.

It was the day after Christmas. Robert Linkins and Dr. Janet McNicholl, two new members of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's staff in Thailand, were planning a quick holiday getaway. Bored with the chat, their 3-year-old son, Aidan, looked out the window.

"Mommy," he said, "the water in the swimming pool is swishing."

His puzzled parents walked over to check. In the pool behind their apartment, 2-foot waves were rising and breaking.

"We wondered whether it was an earthquake," Linkins said. "But Bangkok doesn't get earthquakes. So we put it out of our minds, and we packed up the car and drove down to the beach."

They were not there long. Within 24 hours, Linkins would be leading the CDC's tsunami response in Thailand, sending his co-workers and his wife into the devastation in an urgent mission to find the wounded and account for the dead. Weeks later, they and their CDC colleagues are still trying to understand what they have been through.

The CDC's Thai delegation, a collaboration with Thailand's Public Health Ministry, is the federal agency's largest outside the United States. Almost 20 Americans and more than 100 Thai scientists and administrative staffers work on AIDS and emerging infections in a bougainvillea-filled office park in Bangkok's northern suburbs. But when the tsunamis struck, most of the staff wasn't in Bangkok. The Thais had gone to be with their families for the holiday; the Americans were vacationing from Laos to Australia. Dr. Jordan Tappero, the CDC's chief of mission, was in Omaha, Neb.

McNicholl and Linkins had not planned to be in Bangkok, either. They had arrived in Thailand only six months before. When plans for a family visit fell through, they opted instead for a break at the beach with a colleague, Dr. Michael T. Martin, and his wife and child.

The resort they chose was a few hours' drive from Bangkok on Thailand's east coast. The tsunamis struck the west coast. By the time they arrived, the group still knew nothing of the morning's tragedy --- until they noticed a surprising number of people around the swimming pool with cellphones pinned to their ears.

"I remember thinking, 'Goodness, it's a holiday. They should not be working so hard,'" McNicholl said.

When the news of the tsunamis percolated through the hotel, the group headed home. Linkins, a Ph.D. who is associate director of the HIV program, became temporary chief until Tappero could return. The U.S. Embassy asked McNicholl and Martin to join U.S. and Thai Navy commando units that had been war-gaming off the Thai coast, to look for injured Americans and gauge how well hospitals were caring for them. They flew south into the devastated zone, then split up to drive the coast.

"Every few miles, there would be 50, 60 bodies piled at the side of the road," Martin said. "And when you looked up into the distance, you could see crews bringing out more bodies they had found."

To their surprise, the teams found that the hospitals were not overwhelmed. That was partly because Thai hospitals practice disaster drills once a year, and hundreds of Thai doctors and nurses had rushed south to help. But it was also because there were relatively few patients to treat. Only the moderately injured had survived. The badly injured had drowned.

"Think of the World Trade Center," said Dr. Scott Dowell, who tracks emerging infections in the CDC's Thailand office and used that expertise to watch for post-tsunami disease outbreaks. "People rushed to emergency rooms to help, but there were very few injured. You either died or you survived."

On arriving, a surprise

While the CDC's Thailand staff struggled to get back to Bangkok from their vacations, the Atlanta headquarters wrestled with whom to send to help them. Agency management was besieged by employees begging to go, but planning was more complicated than usual: The deployment had been placed under State Department supervision. The first CDC team members left Atlanta more than a week after the tsunamis. By the time all eight arrived in Thailand, the recovery's most urgent issue had become not treatment of the injured but identification of the dead.

In the six western provinces where the tidal waves struck, crews recovered more than 5,000 bodies. Most were unidentified --- and unidentifiable. They had been soaked by the waves and battered by debris and were decomposing so quickly that birthmarks, scars and even skin and hair color were indistinguishable.

The bodies were massed in Buddhist temples, laid out on the floor between chunks of dry ice, or tucked into hastily dug graves. Forensic teams from 31 countries that lost citizens descended to help take fingerprints and tissue samples from the dead.

"I've had medical training; I have been in autopsies," said Dr. Christopher Braden, who came from Atlanta expecting to work on food-borne illnesses but ended up leading a team that evaluated conditions in the temple morgues. "But when you see hundreds of bodies, and then come back the next day and there are a different set of hundreds, and it just keeps going --- it took a while before I could separate myself and concentrate on the work to be done."

In the first weeks, there was no place to sleep in the devastated areas; hotels were several hours' drive away. On the long rides back and forth in the dark, the team members talked over what they were seeing, monitoring one another for signs of traumatic stress.

"It was horrible; I thought it must be like being in war," said McNicholl, who is normally a laboratory scientist. "But at the same time, it felt as though I went back into medical school mode. I said to myself: 'I have worked 20-hour days before, I will work 20-hour days now; I have seen death before, and now I am seeing death again.' "

'A life-changing event'

The Atlanta staffers who went to Thailand have returned to the United States, and the CDC office in Bangkok has resumed an appearance of normality. But in both cities, those who worked on the tsunamis wonder about the long-term impact on them.

There are unavoidable reminders. Classmates of Dowell's son, 7-year-old twins named Job and Maria Berkhout, were killed, but their belongings remained in the classroom for weeks because both their parents were in intensive care.

"For our kids, the tsunami is a life-changing event," said Bruce Ross, Tappero's deputy, whose 12- and 14-year-old daughters have grown up mostly outside the United States. "It will be something they always remember."

The adults, too, wonder when --- or whether --- they will forget.

"There is nothing I would have done instead of this; I am honored I had the opportunity to help," Linkins said. "But I think it has changed us all in more ways than we know."