

**Closing Address by Dr Gloria Tam, Deputy Director of Health  
Symposium on Emergency Preparedness and  
Management of Mass Fatalities**

9 November 2011

New Yorkers, Speakers, Moderators, Guests, Participants, Colleagues, Staff, Ladies and Gentlemen

This must be one of the most sought after and yet dreaded topical symposium within the public health circle here in recent years.

The reason is obvious. None of us will ever forget where we were or what we were doing on 9/11 2001, when the New York twin towers were struck down by two planes, one after the other; or on 12 May 2008, when the Sichuan earthquake shocked us on the eve of the Beijing Olympics; or on 23 August 2010, when some of our own citizens were so cruelly, brutally and pointlessly torn from their families and friends while touring in the Philippines.

Such was history. Yet, history not only tends to repeat itself, worse still, seemingly more frequently nowadays than before.

I remember being charged to mount public health emergency response teams very shortly after the latter two accidents. I have to confess that in 2008, I was naive enough to find the call a surprise. In the end, it was our staff's wholehearted commitment and selfless determination that made the heartbreaking mission a success.

We were much more alert and also better equipped in 2010, though needless to say, it remains every staff's wish that we may never need to act likewise again.

Wishful thinking aside, we are acutely mindful of "whatever can happen will happen", now more than ever. Thus, we reckon that it will only be prudent that we train and maintain ourselves in the best of shape for emergencies, foreseeable or not. After all, the fact emerges clearly as that so much is dependent on the actions of the various emergency response services which can, in so many ways, make a fantastic difference to people's lives in all sorts of disasters.

So, to our emergency response experts from New York City, we are truly indebted for your coming all the way to share with us your invaluable experience and teach us your lessons learnt.

Especially that this is 9/11's tenth anniversary, it would also only be right for us to let you know that here in Hong Kong, we understand; that we sympathise; that we hold you in our thoughts and prayers, but at the same time, we know too well that it is hopelessly and utterly inadequate.

We can at least feel something of what you have been through and of how the wounds never really heal because of our share during the devastating 2008 Sichuan earthquake and the tragic 2010 Philippines kidnap.

Therefore, whilst we will continue to pray for the best, like you, we are also striving to get ready for the worst, mindful of this other saying that "luck will only dawn on those prepared".

Ladies and gentlemen, I trust that only a handful amongst us know that what started off as a young American, Josh ASCHHEIM's exchange student programme turned out to be the critical building block in linking up New York City Chief Medical Examiner's Office on the Atlantic coast with our Forensic Pathology Service on that of the Pacific, with the delivery of this Symposium as a result.

But this is not the end. It just cannot be so for already, I have heard from a number in the audience that they too, like us, can see so much potential for the development of this partnership between NYC and HK in order that our own communities and beyond be better served. Indeed, there is almost unanimous consensus that this could at most be the end of our beginning.

So, thank you all for your interest, participation and support which goes so much to reinforce our very positive outlook just revealed. We honestly look forward to welcoming you all back on another suitable occasion for more communications. Good bye for now and an early Christmas wish to you and families!