

Starting over

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On March 7, the city of Bahía Blanca, located in southern Argentina, with a population of approximately 350,000, experienced torrential rainfall (totaling 400 mm in 6 hours) that completely flooded it and collapsed its health system.

How do I feel after so much sadness?

How can I express what I want after seeing so much pain?

However, Bahía and its people tell me, “Here we are ready to start”, or rather continue helping as they have done since that fateful Friday, the 7th.

Without electricity, without water, and lit by their cell phones, the neonatal nurses of the main healthcare center of the region, under the supervision of the doctor on duty, moved “their” premature babies, making skin-to-skin contact to avoid hypothermia and, like them, hundreds of volunteers took to the streets (rivers) to help those who were at risk or screamed for help. Two brothers who owned a bakery in General Cerri rescued more than 70 people seriously affected by the flood and accommodated them in their parents’ house, where they provided food and care, including for their pets.¹

Were they following an evacuation protocol or a contingency plan in the event of a catastrophe?

No. Their inner strength told them, “Here we are, we are arriving...”.

Gradually, the requests for help were silenced by the multiplication of volunteers and rescue forces; spaces were opened for evacuees that exceeded a thousand, assisted by public and private entities that responded to the demands of this population separated from their habitat and customs.

Faced with such a tragedy, how was health care organized? Two public and private institutions were affected due to a lack of operability, with maternity wards that attended to more than half of the births and the entire public sector. The crisis committees that were immediately formed unified public and private assistance. Two field hospitals were established for the non-pediatric population, and pediatric care was redistributed among the remaining public hospitals and the private sector’s operating services. Regional requirements (Bahía Blanca is the referral center for the south of the province of Buenos Aires) were coordinated and referred to different provincial hospitals, depending on the case’s complexity. Public sector deliveries and newborns were attended to in private institutions, often by personnel from the referral center.

The medical association acted to safeguard

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its members' work and welfare; the scientific societies offered their immediate support by providing information on similar situations.

Immediately, doctors, nurses, and other related collaborators put into practice the basic principle of our humanistic vocation: "To cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always."

The municipal, provincial, and national organisms offered immediate action in the face of such a tragedy, I imagine, with a realistic criterion and without partisan flags; Bahía needed (and needs) all of us.

I am unable to analyze the causes of such a tragedy due to the limited scientific knowledge and current infrastructure. In any case, the questions are there:

Could it have been avoided, and can it happen again? I am aware that no city is prepared to receive almost 400 mm of rain in 6 hours, so what should be done? Specialists and governmental entities are responsible for providing us with answers.^{2,3}

Our primary academic teaching and research centers, Universidad Nacional del Sur and CONICET, were severely damaged, resulting in irreparable losses in the short term.⁴

I cannot mention all the heroes of this tragedy; there were many of them, and my ignorance of names would betray the forgotten ones. However, in this complex present and indeed future panorama, something so close to the feelings of our people has emerged: solidarity. Our people, the Argentines, know what solidarity is.

We could summarize it as a "virtue by which we show ourselves united with other people without necessarily having an affective bond that unites us, by sharing their needs." It is part of human survival.⁴

Solidarity appeared spontaneously in neighborhoods, clubs, and churches. Thousands of teenagers, young and not so young, organized and supervised by adults, gave their time to distribute the necessities that people had demanded because the terrible storm had taken them away or damaged them beyond repair.

The demand for water, cleaning, and sanitizing products increased over the hours.

The contaminated muddy residue impregnated everything it touched and lingered in the stench that was breathed.

Any means of mobility helped bring what the community was asking for. They approached from different places near and far, saying, "We bring this, and we are going for more."

The health entities and their staff were and are at the height of the circumstances, preparing for a future full of morbidities typical of the flood and seasonal pathologies; respiratory, infectious, and post-stress diseases are just "around the corner." We are confident that with the same discipline that faced the tragedy, their recovery is part of the subject to be faced.

Here we are, and as the song says, ready to "Start over..." It will surely not be easy, but it will be achieved, as we did after December 16, 2023.⁵ On that day, a brutal storm shook Bahía Blanca with winds of 150 km/h.

As a final reflection, I wonder if having managed to unify public and private entities allowed us to overcome pressing contingencies. Based on a single medical practice with knowledge and responsibility, the care concentration in skilled entities would not improve results at a lower operating cost. A utopia, perhaps.

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