

Times Standard

Not My Fault: When an 'expert' finds themselves on the flip side of emergency response

Lori Dengler for the Times-Standard

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Volunteers learn how to handle and injured person as part of Humboldt CERT training.

I never saw it coming. A week ago, Saturday those words became true for me. I was crossing Central Ave in Eureka in a crosswalk and nearly to the other side when bam, I was on my back in the road. The next ten hours provided me a different perspective of emergency response – the importance of emergency responders and emergency rooms and made me think about how different my experience would have been had it occurred during a regional disaster.

Before I go any further, I am ok and likely to make a full recovery. Once it happened, everyone did the right thing. The driver who hit me immediately stopped and came over to me, nearly as shocked as I was at what had just happened. My first thoughts were denial – I am fine, all I need to do is get up, dust myself off and head on. We all do this, it's instinct and if I had been attacked by a leopard a million years ago, that would have been my only route to possible survival.

Fortunately, I have worked with enough first responders to hear a second voice. Don't move, don't turn your head. Stay absolutely in the position you are in. Call 911. I pulled my phone out of my pocket (no I was NOT looking at my phone when the accident happened) but found myself completely incapable of operating it. Fortunately, someone in the now growing group of spectators called and within five minutes four police cars and the fire rescue vehicle had arrived. Eureka Police Officer Tyler Moore was the first to reach me. He was calm, supportive and efficient in getting the important information on who I was and assessing my condition.

I was also fortunate I was not alone. My husband was still in the car and never saw the accident happen. We were going to a concert and arrived early. I opted to nab really good seats while he continued to read something in the car. My last clear thought before impact was to savor how wonderful the concert was going to be. It is so helpful to have someone with you when something like this happens and knows all the relevant info about what meds you are on, allergies, and so forth. In the future, I'll make sure I have a card in my wallet with names/phone numbers of family members/friends who can quickly be contacted in such a situation in case it ever happens again, and I am by myself.

I never lost consciousness, and my head never struck the ground. But the event made me stupid. Even without injuries, experiencing something that isn't in your memory bank and your frontal lobe has no data for interpreting leaves you momentarily bereft of common sense. Expert help arrived quickly and took most decision making out of my hands. But I do wish I had better documentation of the scene.

I can't overemphasize how important it was that the driver stopped. If they hadn't, I likely would have been run over and the outcome not nearly as mild as it appears to be. Drivers, you also need to still that instinct to keep moving. I don't know what the ultimate outcome will be, but far less impactful to both of us had they not stopped. This is not an uncommon situation, and I have found myself in that driver's seat – a few blocks from home running on autopilot and perhaps momentarily distracted by the lights of a passing car. I have not hit anyone but have had several close calls.

The ambulance arrived a few minutes later – an all-woman crew (Rebecca, Kalin, and Danielle) They were very competent – the first step was to stabilize my neck with a cervical collar in case of injury and then to carefully rotate me onto a stretcher. They were careful to explain each step.

I've never been in an ambulance before, and you don't see much on your back strapped to a stretcher. I closed my eyes for most of the ride as the disconnect between visual input and the motion sensors in your ear can lead to something akin to seasickness. It was a short drive and arriving by ambulance at the St. Joe's emergency room does give admittance priority. I was quickly offloaded and handed to the ER staff and wheeled into a private bay.

By this time, I am feeling very cold and on the verge of getting the shakes. My blood pressure and heart rate have soared. These are symptoms of shock, another evolutionary response to stress where blood is diverted from extremities to your core. If untreated, shock can rapidly lead to permanent organ damage or death. One of the great pleasures of an emergency room is heated blankets. Eight blankets and three hours later I finally began to feel warm.

It was a long night of x-rays, cat scans, and waiting. By my estimate, at least ten people interacted with me – doctors, technicians, and nurses. All were incredibly busy – I don't recommend an emergency room on a Saturday night. There were gurneys in hallways and at least three sepsis alerts (potentially critical condition due to infection) during my ten hours stay. Emergency room staff are on 12-hour shifts and work very hard. No one I met was anything other than kind, competent, and professional.

How might my experience have differed had it occurred during a regional disaster? Let's set the same stage but a major earthquake has occurred at the same time. Maybe I am hit by someone rushing to get to their family at home or in panicky evacuation mode. I'm not talking about a quake like last December where there was almost no damage – although the traffic jam caused by unnecessary auto evacuations might have delayed the emergency responders. I'm talking about a great earthquake – at least magnitude 8 - that causes widespread shaking damage, landslides, fires, and a tsunami.

In this case, it is extremely unlikely that any trained responder will reach me, perhaps for hours or longer. Last Saturday, I used 50% of Eureka's ambulance capacity during my adventure. During ordinary times, there are only two fully staffed ambulances ready to respond 24-7. This can be increased through mutual aid from surrounding jurisdictions and by calling up reserve staff, but they won't be on call and if bridges are toppled and roads blocked, can't reach me anyway. I probably couldn't make a 911 call because of damaged infrastructure or just too many people trying to use their phones at the same time, jamming the system.

In this scenario, the only people who can help me or others who might have been injured by earthquake damage are the residents of the neighborhood. Most people do want to help in times of a major disaster but often don't know what to do. What could someone do to help me, a stranger lying on the street? If you have no response training, there are two things anyone can do. First don't move me unless I am in imminent danger of traffic, fire, heavy rain or some other impending hazard. Second assume I am in shock and cover me with blankets to warm me up.

If I am really lucky, this accident will have occurred in a place where a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) has been formed. CERTs are groups of neighborhood volunteers who have completed a 23-hour training that includes first aid and the handling of injured people, fire suppression, team building, personal preparedness, and preliminary search and rescue assessments. If a CERT trained person shows up in the onlookers, I know I will be in good hands. More about CERT at <https://www.humboldtcert.com/cert-training/>

Note: another pre-tsunami week event coming up this Thursday March 20 5pm: Tsunami Tspaghetti Tsupper at the Humboldt Grange 5845 Humboldt Hill Rd. The event includes supper, talks about the December 5 earthquake and information about the tsunami evacuation drill on March 26.

Lori Dengler is an emeritus professor of geology at Cal Poly Humboldt, and an expert in tsunami and earthquake hazards. The opinions expressed are hers and not the Times--Standard's. All Not My Fault columns are archived online at <https://kamome.humboldt.edu/taxonomy/term/5> and may be reused for educational purposes. Leave a message at (707) 826-6019 or email Kamome@humboldt.edu for questions and comments about this column or to request copies of the preparedness magazine "Living on Shaky Ground."