

Ground Zero

FEMA Criticized for Its Handling of 9/11 Claims

By DAVID W. CHEN

An internal review of the Federal Emergency Management Agency's performance after the Sept. 11 terror attack has concluded that the agency should have been more flexible and fair in helping people with economic losses. The agency also needs to coordinate better with other government agencies and charities in future disasters, the review concluded.

The report, by FEMA's Office of Inspector General, echoed complaints that have been compounding for months about an agency that has struggled to cope with a disaster without precedent in nature, scale or cost.

The 76-page report, which was released yesterday to members of Congress, did praise the agency for doing its best to help as many people as possible within its guidelines. Still, in fairly blunt language, the inspectors provided a long list of shortcomings and recommendations. And, in an indication of just how charged the subject of the relief effort still remains, the report also included some comments from federal and state

officials challenging some of the report's preliminary findings.

"While we acknowledge that there is always room for improvement," wrote Joe M. Allbaugh, the agency's director, "we strongly believe FEMA met the significant challenges created by the unique response and recovery circumstances of such an unprecedented disaster."

Of all the programs reviewed in the report, the most critical comments were reserved for the Mortgage and Rental Assistance program, which provides cash to people facing eviction or foreclosure as a result of a disaster.

In 68 previous disasters, the report noted, the program doled out \$18.1 million. But in New York, by early December, \$76 million had been spent. Moreover, the program is still open; the deadline for applying is Jan. 31.

That inexperience in applying such a little-used program to a large-scale disaster was exacerbated, the report said, by the agency's inability to understand the indirect economic effects of the disaster. And ultimately,

those factors contributed to "difficulties in delivering timely and effective assistance."

While FEMA did overhaul the program in late June to make it easier for more people to apply, the report said more should be done — perhaps through new legislation — to capture as many potential applicants as possible. Among other suggestions, the report said that the agency should develop a program that distinguishes between physical and economic loss, has fair and equitable eligibility criteria, reaches diverse ethnic populations more quickly and simplifies documentation requirements for applicants.

The report offered more muted criticisms of another controversial program, the Individual and Family Grant program, which reimbursed residents for air-quality equipment but was bogged down by rumors, confusion and unusual circumstances. It also offered mild criticisms of FEMA's difficulty in coordinating with federal agencies, such as the Environmental Protection Agency and the Department of Justice.

NY TIMES 1/8/02

The Times Appoints Frank Rich As Associate Editor and Essayist

Frank Rich, an Op-Ed columnist and a senior writer for The New York Times Magazine, has been appointed associate editor of the newspaper and will write a cultural essay for the front page of Arts & Leisure each Sunday beginning this spring.

The appointment was announced yesterday by Howell Raines, executive editor of The Times, who said Mr. Rich would also be an adviser to Steven Erlanger, the cultural news editor.

Mr. Rich's last Op-Ed column will appear on Jan. 18.

Gail Collins, editorial page editor, said: "Frank pioneered a new kind of column for us and proved that it was possible to write longer, more searching pieces that still retained the verve and passion we prize in our Op-Ed columnists. We'll miss him, but like everyone else at The Times, we're very excited about this new venture."

Mr. Raines said: "Frank Rich is one of the nation's premier cultural commentators, and I'm delighted to welcome him back to the news pages. We plan for his column to be an anchor of the Arts & Leisure section. In addition, he will work closely with Steve Erlanger, our newly appointed cultural news editor, in planning coverage and the overall design of the culture pages. Frank and Steve make a formidable team."

He added: "It is also worth noting that earlier in their Times careers, both Steve and Frank worked with our former managing editor Arthur Gelb, the original architect of The Times's cultural report in the modern era. Frank's appointment represents the blend of creativity and continuity of tradition that is a hallmark of The Times."

Mr. Rich, 53, became a columnist on the Op-Ed page in 1994 and was given the additional title of senior writer for the magazine in 1999. The

dual title was a first for The Times, and Mr. Rich began to write essays and articles longer than those accommodated in the 700-word Op-Ed format. He also wrote articles and commentaries for the magazine, drawing from his background as a theater critic and an observer of art and entertainment.

Mr. Rich came to The Times in 1980 as chief theater critic. During the 1992 presidential campaign, he joined with Maureen Dowd, then a Washington correspondent and now an Op-Ed columnist, in writing a daily column at the political conventions. They repeated the assignment in January 1993 for Inauguration Week in Washington.

In addition to his work at The Times, Mr. Rich has written about culture and politics for many other publications. His latest book, a childhood memoir titled "Ghost Light," was published in 2000 by Random House. A collection of Mr. Rich's drama reviews, "Hot Seat: Theater Criticism for The New York Times, 1980-1993," was published by Random House in 1998. Another book, "The Theatre Art of Boris Aronson," written by Mr. Rich with Lisa Aronson, was published by Knopf in 1987.

Before joining The Times, Mr. Rich was a film and television critic at Time magazine. Earlier he was film critic for The New York Post and film critic and senior editor of New Times magazine. He was a founding editor of The Richmond Mercury, a Virginia weekly, in the early 1970's.

Mr. Rich earned a degree in American history and literature at Harvard, graduating magna cum laude in 1971. He was editorial chairman of The Harvard Crimson, an honorary Harvard College scholar, a member of Phi Beta Kappa and the recipient of a Henry Russell Shaw traveling fellowship.

NY TIMES 1/8/02

City Grappling With WTC Cough

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treatment to clear her air passages.

In November, she found herself gasping for air when she contracted the flu. At New York Methodist Hospital, the otherwise healthy actress required several hours' treatment to restore normal breathing.

In its more extreme form, WTC cough has debilitated otherwise healthy men and women, according to physicians who have treated them.

Like sea anemones that ball up when touched, the airways of these patients recoil from microscopic foreign objects and constrict. It is possible, Kelly and other physicians said, that these people are permanently injured and will suffer more respiratory problems.

At the Sept. 9 New York Academy of Medicine conference, where authorities confirmed the cough's existence, Mount Sinai School of Medicine occupational health specialist Dr. Steven Levin said he has treated more than 1,000 people who worked in the Ground Zero area last fall. "It is our impression that many have developed inflammatory responses, and that not so many are really fully well," Levin said. "I have very few patients who in fact have returned to pre-9/11 levels of lung function."

Levin's clinic has identified sinusitis, laryngitis and new-onset asthma in the workers, in addition to the extreme World Trade Center cough.

"What you have downwind [in southeastern Manhattan and Brooklyn] are people with variable susceptibility. And we can't predict who the susceptibles will be," Levin said in an interview. It is predictable, he argued, that vulnerable people — workers, residents and commuters — who inhaled Ground Zero air last fall will suffer health problems.

The New York City Department of Health has found little in its air and home sampling to explain the syndrome, Assistant Commissioner of Health Dr. Jessica Leighton said. Only 1 percent of sample sites in lower Manhattan were "above EPA standards" for asbestos or other legally controlled air pollutants.

Indeed, EPA spokeswoman Bonnie Bellow said even in the hours after the Twin Towers collapsed, New York City air "did not exceed national air-quality standards." On only one late September day did the city's air appear unhealthy, according to the EPA's legal criteria.

"That's not at all to suggest there wasn't a huge amount of dust," added Mary Mears, another EPA spokeswoman.

That may be the point, according to scientists: The chemicals or asbestos for which air is tested may not be to blame.

Environmental health expert Lung Chi Chen of the New York University School of Medicine is a member of a team analyzing dust, debris and air samples collected last fall. Chen agrees with the EPA that there was very little asbestos in the debris; indeed, the city Department of Health stopped asbestos installation in the very earliest stages of trade center construction. However, the clouds contained microscopic shards of glass, much of it coated with contaminants such as soot, bacteria, mold and human cells. Additionally, pulverized concrete was highly alkaline or rife with metallic elements.

Normally, the human lung tends to be an acidic environment, with a pH of around 5 to 7. The debris on Sept. 11 had a pH ranging from 9.2 to 11.5. Even a hyperventilating individual suffering from severe anxiety, the normal cause of alkalosis of the lung, rarely runs a pH of higher than 7.7.

The human lung has a mechanism called the "mucous escalator," in which irritating particles trigger a response called complement, which releases large amounts of mucous. The mucous surrounds the troubling particles, which are then coughed up. In response to extreme pH, coupled with glass and other irritants, airways constrict and the mucous that usually encases toxins and allows them to be expelled isn't effective. A dry, nonproductive cough is the result.

Dr. Sonia Buist of Oregon Health Sciences University in Portland, Ore., has studied the impact of the 1981 eruption of Mount St. Helens on the lungs of Oregon loggers who worked seasonally in the area in the next five years. The ash they inhaled, like the World Trade Center debris, was high in ground glass. They experienced lung irritation, and symptoms varied according to the content of the ash breathed, Buist said. Most were restored to full health because the particles were cleared from their lungs.

The Mount St. Helens analogy has its limitations, however. Volcanos produce very acidic, not alkaline, material. Further, Buist found that glass fibers coated with contaminants, as in World Trade

Center debris, were harder to clear from the lungs.

Dr. Marc Wilkenfeld of the Columbia University Health Sciences Division said he believes the WTC debris was "frankly corrosive" and may have damaged human lung cells in a more direct fashion. He noted that a U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study of city firefighters found that most WTC cough victims also suffered gastrointestinal tract irritation, the result of swallowing airborne debris. That finding, he argued, is a sign of corrosive damage to the gastrointestinal tract.

All of this puts health officials in a tough position. Within days of Sept. 11, EPA Director Christie Whitman said the city's air was safe — a position a spokesman later clarified to mean that the air did not contain dangerous levels of asbestos or other normally tested toxins. The EPA has maintained that position, and all testing and cleanup operations have focused on a small part of Manhattan, below Canal Street, and a short list of substances, chiefly asbestos.

If testing this fall in lower Manhattan shows "there is anything to indicate we should go outside that area," Bellow said, then residents from other parts of the city who place their names on an EPA list before Oct. 3 may be notified. Residents outside that zone can call 877-796-5471.

So far, no residents above Canal Street or in Brooklyn have been ruled eligible for such federal services as apartment cleaning as a result of residential or occupational exposure, Columbia's Wilkenfeld said.

Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-Manhattan), who has criticized the EPA's response to air-quality concerns, said the agency's focus on lower Manhattan is "entirely, completely arbitrary. There's no scientific basis to it."

Nadler said starting last fall, he asked the EPA to expand its testing so the area of focus could be based on scientific criteria.

"In January, I said, 'Get a satellite photo. See where the plume went.' And the EPA said, 'There are no satellite photos,'" Nadler said in an interview. "And when I saw the NASA photos in Newsday [Aug. 23], I was livid, because I was lied to."

"That is not true," the EPA's Bellow said. "He was not told that. We would have no reason to tell the congressman that they didn't exist when they did."

TOMORROW, in Health & Discovery
The Scope of WTC Respiratory Ailments

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Ground Zero

Air of Infirmary

City struggles to contend with widespread WTC cough

First of two stories

By Laurie Garrett
STAFF WRITER

Physicians in the city have made it clear: The malady now officially called World Trade Center cough is like nothing they've ever seen, and hundreds — perhaps thousands — of people are experiencing it.

The extent of this lung disease is not known, and for a combination of bureaucratic reasons, the extent of the human health impact may be understated. Moreover, cleanup efforts may be inappropriately focused on a single element of the debris: asbestos.

The ailment, as described recently

by Dr. Kerry Kelly, the New York Fire Department's chief medical officer, is characterized by a reduced lung capacity and a hyper-reactivity of the airways to inhaled particles, bacteria and viruses. The cough is dry and nonproductive and can leave the sufferer gasping for air.

As physicians sought to pin down the ailment's causes, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency was monitoring Ground Zero and lower Manhattan for chemicals and substances that violate the Clean Air Act. It has become clear, though, that the cough's causes have little if anything to do with those substances. Rather, the culprit appears to be microscopic bits of glass.

Satellite images shot by NASA throughout Sept. 11, 2001, depict the plume of dust, toxins and debris drifting directly from Ground Zero southeastward, blanketing a portion of Brooklyn. Hospitals there have reported increases in respiratory complaints.

In Brooklyn Heights, Dr. Tucker Woods was running the emergency room of Long Island College Hospital on Sept. 11 when, he recalls, the staff handled a "huge influx" of respiratory cases. "And I personally this year have seen a real increase in asthma complaints and chronic bronchitis," Woods said. "It's World Trade Center cough; absolutely new cases. And it's also a worsening of old, chronic respiratory cases."

Even mild forms of the cough can severely aggravate existing conditions. Anne, 33, a Broadway actress who asked that her last name not be used for fear of endangering her roles in musical theater, was home in Park Slope on Sept. 11. Three years ago, she was diagnosed with a mild case of asthma, which, she said, had been controlled with the aerosol medication albuterol.

On the morning after the terrorist attack, she awoke "feeling my chest was tight, sort of heavy. So I stood up to cross the room and get my albuterol, and I passed out." She hobbled to her neighborhood emergency room for

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