

# Hubris, hierarchies and

# humanity

Emily Hough speaks to **Lucy Easthope** – author of *When the Dust Settles* and CRJ Advisory Panel Member – to learn more about her thinking on where we are today, and the way forward for emergency management and planning

**W**hen *the Dust Settles* is deliberately: “Not so affronting that you wouldn’t be seen dead with it,” according to Easthope. But nor does it pull its punches. She is vocal on themes spanning the gamut of emergency planning, response and recovery. Much will reverberate with those working in the field, not least because she has stuck her head above the parapet and voiced concerns concerning issues about which many have been feeling uneasy for years. She also wanted to write something that would truly shine a light on her work and that of her colleagues.

“This book should make you think,” she explains, “It is about principles. I didn’t want to be so alienating as to not be allowed in the conversation again, but the way forward is all about challenge.” And indeed, not only does she question several sacred cows, but emphasises that it is also about challenging ourselves. As she writes in *When the Dust Settles*: “Disaster exposes us, our society and our leaders, to the core.”

Our first area of discussion revolves around a point consistently raised throughout the book, that of unintended consequences. Easthope warns against responders inadvertently making situations worse for people and communities who have been affected by a disaster. Often, this must be admitted, such consequences appear to stem from institutionalised thoughtlessness and centring the responding agency rather than the humans who are at the heart of the incident. “At some point, it is very hard to disaggregate the original disaster from the harm done by, and to, society,” Easthope says. “Errors made in the response can change the course of the recovery and undermine the longer term psychosocial health of the whole community,” she writes.

“But there is also a point at which they become intended consequences,” she tells me. Easthope says a consequence becomes ‘intended’ when: “You have recognised it and not done anything to mitigate the consequence and the harm it causes,” drawing upon the Ukraine refugees billeting scheme in the UK as one example. “If good, seasoned specialists

are telling you that there’s a problem and you choose not to mitigate it, you eventually reach a point at which policies are enacted, despite loud agitation, then there’s a heaviness that descends on us when the consequences of that policy play out.” Unfortunately, other examples abound: “The floodwaters that do so much damage, but then we make decisions that make their effects worse. Or in a pandemic when we shut down all youth clubs and schools.” Many of the actions that made things worse in the latter incident are comprehensively dissected in *When the Dust Settles* and Grenfell is a constant in the book’s narrative, in which she also describes the complicated physical structures that: “Entwine to make up a place.” Break these links and the consequences last for a long time. Another example is that of evacuating nursing homes. On paper, an ostensibly simple and logical plan in a disaster would be to move people from one home – most likely in alphabetical order – to facilities with spare places. But when people have to move away from their areas or networks – whatever the disaster – they lose their: “Sense of home, their sense of safety at home, the lack of physical objects that mean something to them.” In one real-life nursing home evacuation, planning failed to take into account that each home is a community in itself and residents were separated from their trusted carers, their friends, the familiar. The book notes dryly: “We had just ripped that apart – us, the responders.”

The attitude that those affected by disaster should be grateful for the help they receive lingers. Easthope says that she challenges herself constantly about being condescending or paternalistic, in part as a reaction to having observed the attitudes of other responders during her career. As she notes in the book, there is an urgent need for introspection in the emergency management community about its own principles. The

idea of ‘good’ versus ‘bad’ help lies in the fundamental need of humans to ‘do’ something when disaster strikes; this usually takes the form of donated goods. *CRJ* 17:2 reported on piles of unsuitable or unwanted clothing littering the roads in Ukraine. ‘Cash not stuff’ is a difficult – but necessary – concept to convey without offending well-meaning people. Lucy turned it into a hashtag the minute she realised that people were once again being allowed to create a secondary disaster of donated goods.

All of this links back into planning and not understanding people’s reactions to disaster. All too often, plans are formulated that: “Tell people where to go, what to say and what to bring with them. But that does not mean that there won’t be chaos once you factor in all of the vagaries of human behaviour and the collision

of an unusual set of circumstances.” It seems that many plans merely examine a potential scenario and plot out a structured response, without taking into account the people who are at the centre of it. Take, for example Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear (CBRN) response planning outlined in the book: “... there is always the assumption that because some of the risks we discuss are so deadly, all normal rites and rituals, protections and sensibilities must be stripped away. Muslim women must be ordered to undress in the town centre, older people sealed into their nursing homes, pets will need to be shot and personal effects burned on pyres. People will comply or die.” Much of this has clearly been carried over into the Covid-19 lockdowns in the UK and elsewhere.

## Anti-human response

Says Easthope: “One of the most troubling aspects of the point we have reached is that our response has been so anti-human. Everything was about the virus rather than the ripple effect of the virus.” As with CBRN incidents, there’s a danger in telling people that they must do something for the common good and by appealing to their altruism. The flip side of that particular behavioural coin is that compliance fuelled by fear can lead to excess, destroying neighbourhood cohesion, wellbeing and mental health, particularly when people start to keep an eye out for so-called rule breakers. She says that Covid-19 became: “All about the incident rather than its consequences. People were self-policing, saying things like, ‘I’ve seen you go out

twice with the dog; you’re only supposed to go out once.’ Actually, you could go out as many times as you liked with a dog, but you didn’t dare tweet that, because people would call you a granny killer.”

Easthope talks about the ‘long tail’ of the pandemic; the missed cancer diagnoses, the mental

health, the domestic violence, not to mention a population isolated with the only links to the outside provided by the Internet and its negative algorithms, or the media’s hyperbolic, round-the-clock reporting.

After the first UK lockdown, she says there was an increase in paediatric head trauma; later, domestic violence helpline calls increased by 65 per cent. Hospital admissions of young teens suffering from eating disorders grew by 50 per cent. These were all predictable. Yet, in the offices of government, Easthope says there was: “Little appetite for practical, operational advice on what to do. Everything was about ‘behavioural insights’ teams and how to get the public to comply.”

Inevitably, such fear – and we all remember the degree of terror of the first lockdown – has a profound, and

An uphill struggle: “This is not a safe space to raise issues, a really unsafe sharing environment for risk communication”

sometimes delayed, effect on mental health. Recovery isn't linear; disasters can leave a psychosocial legacy that will last for decades, says Easthope, and carefully planning for recovery is equally, if not more, important than preparing for response.

"One big thing for me is about creating safe spaces for children. Schools should not have closed," she says. "Fine, don't do lessons, but hire local cinemas and sports grounds. The idea of the home as a safe space is an absolute misnomer.

"I work with a project on children's disaster resilience and am building it into presentations to young people for local authorities. I am constantly trialling the best types of support for young people. Very early on, because of my links to various charities, I was alert to the types of harms a pandemic

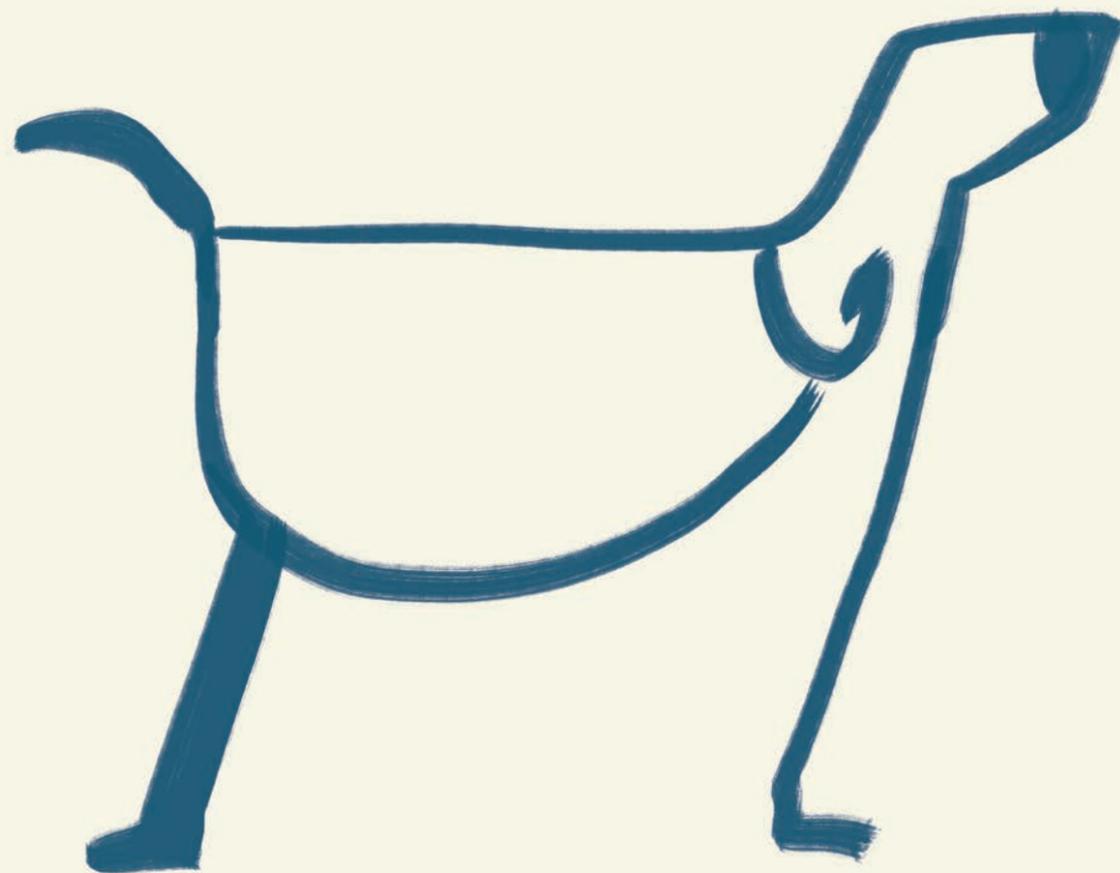
would cause. And we are not just talking about the consequences of an infectious disease, which did bring a horrible wrath with it, but the additional effects of closing face-to-face eating disorder clinics, youth clubs and so

on; all of those things that we knew would cause harm. And now I'm not seeing the impetus to fix children first," she emphasises.

One sentence in the book struck me hard. Easthope discusses the experience of a community in the UK that suffered extreme flooding, and people's subsequent hypervigilance and fears: "Some of the children would soil themselves when they realised it was raining."

Read that again. Let it sink in. This is why the recovery phase is so important. And this is why so many of the complexities and nuances of getting it wrong are not

Actually, in lockdown, you could go out as many times as you liked with a dog, but you didn't dare tweet that, because people would call you a 'granny killer'



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widely understood outside of the discipline. All too often the role of emergency planning officer can be tacked onto another job, or hierarchical norms means there may be six or more people between the emergency planner and the person they need to reach. The emergency planner could define how well an incident is handled forever, but is not always included in any power conversations.

"I do worry that I will die with us not having resolved the career and training path for an emergency planner. What happens is that we recruit good young graduates from emergency management programmes, but often their manager turns out to be someone from a completely different area of responsibility," she says.

There have been many discussions in the UK about placing emergency planning within its own chartered institute with a more formal requirement for qualifications such as degree programmes or apprenticeships. "But for so many years, a lot of emergency planners came into the profession as their last job after retiring from the police or the fire service, and they would evidence their expertise through incident response. Of course that's valid, but there was a prevailing attitude about 'young whippersnappers' coming into the field in a reaction to the fact that the new entrants weren't as grizzled as they were. We cannot keep on getting this wrong, allowing old and more jaded members to spoil the energy of the new ones."

She continues: "I am about to do an interview on an inquiry into the treatment of children in the pandemic. I don't think we had a consensus about this as emergency planners – though we were all concerned – but for me it brought out the strong links between emergency planning and policing, along with the lack of freedom of many emergency planners in local authorities. For example, if a police force tweeted something, the local authority would automatically retweet it. There wasn't an awful lot of critical thinking or reflection as to whether this was right."

When asked what this would have looked like during the Covid-19 lockdowns, she replies: "They could have said, 'We fully need to protect you from the virus, but will do everything possible to keep the parks open. Here are the domestic violence numbers. This is how to get primary healthcare support, and so on'.

"The way forward is about gentle challenge to ourselves as emergency planners and how we present ourselves first, along with the number of routes through which you can come into this profession" says Easthope. She continues, saying that the best emergency planners are aligned with other fields, and have an understanding of a multitude of other disciplines. But they also need to be equals in the room.

Turning to the very top of the decision-making tree, Easthope affirms the disquiet that many have felt, being firmly of the opinion that a good government would understand that any kind of resilience or preparedness work pays dividends in peacetime as well as in times of crisis. "A strong, thoughtful cabinet where every lead department brings its plans to the table, for example, tends to be a well organised, well-run department. But one thing I really noticed when interacting with government departments was just how haphazard it had all become.

"I saw sloppiness, paralysis and inertia. This is not a safe space to raise issues, a really unsafe sharing environment for risk communication. There's a myth, a lie, that all



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Caitlin Chescoe

of these events have been surprises. And if you are not careful, you will become a walking embodiment of the lie. The government was saying there were no plans, no planners and no planning. I joined social media to challenge that directly and have been doing so ever since."

But to finish on a more optimistic note, Easthope says that she has observed many positive things that have emerged in this field. These include effective, fast liaison with public health. "You can see where we were before the *Health and Care Act 2022*, before the Grenfell Tower fire, and where we are today. The directors of public health have found their feet and this evolution is shown in more recent events, such as the monkeypox outbreak." And the book has resonated across continents, with readers from all backgrounds: "People have enjoyed the more difficult stuff, it has helped to identify the malaise that some were feeling, and that gives me hope.

### Reclaiming the humanity

"I wanted to reclaim the expertise and humanity that lies within emergency planning, and let people know that behind it all, there's a person, that humans are working in these fields," she continues.

She tells me she was delighted to go out with some young emergency planners recently: "I felt like the older matron, there was a whole raft of new phrases, terminologies and acronyms. The younger me would have gone away to check on what they all meant. The older me knows to let the younger generation be; they have the future with them. They are brilliant at it and that gives me excitement for where we go next."

■ When the Dust Settles: Stories of Love, Loss and Hope from an Expert in Disaster is published by Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN: 9781529358247

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