

# Dr. Joseph A. Barbera, MD

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## **What sparked your interest in pursuing medicine?**

In high school and college I began working with children with disabilities, which made me interested in a medical career.

## **What influenced your career transition from medicine to emergency management?**

I was training in an emergency medicine residency in New York City when the 1985 Mexico City earthquake occurred. I felt that I could provide services in those desperate situations; one year later, I had the opportunity to join a volunteer medical team that trained to respond to underground mine incidents and that experience led to the opportunity to help develop the US government's international search & rescue team, followed by the FEMA urban search & rescue system.

## **What sort of research do you focus on as a medical emergency responder?**

Initially I focused primarily on researching the provision of medical care in collapsed structures and more generally in major disasters such as earthquakes; now, I focus on how to manage medical and public health emergency response to get the best care to people in need.

## **What do you like most about your current job and what have been your most meaningful experiences in regards to teaching?**

I enjoy helping students understand the theory and application of emergency management and to think creatively and independently.

## **What about in regards to emergency management?**

It has been gratifying watching current and former students excel as they participate in emergency preparedness and in emergency response. From 9-11 to the recent Haiti earthquake response, our students and graduates have been involved in key roles and helped make a difference.

## **Has your job involved an international component and/or traveling? If so, what populations do you typically assist and what services do you provide abroad?**

I respond internationally through Fairfax County (Virginia) Urban Search & Rescue Task Force and the USAID Office of US Foreign Disaster Assistance (OFDA). Usually I deploy as a member of a task force

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doing search & rescue, but I deployed to the tsunami in Banda Aceh Indonesia for OFDA to do assessments and provide advice on further assistance.

**It appears as though the healthcare realm provides a wide range of career opportunities alternative to the more traditionally recognized roles. What advice do you have for students pursuing a health career that may be interested in veering off into a non-traditional path such as yourself?**

Start by being very good at your usual healthcare role, paying careful attention to detail and understanding why you do what you do. You can then begin to understand how to transition that same type of role over to the disaster situation. Finally, take advantage of opportunities that come your way even if you need to provide services free until your role or the role of similar healthcare practitioners is established.