International Strategy for Disaster Reduction – World Health Organization 2008-09 Campaign on safer healthcare facilities

Richard N Bradley, The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston
International Strategy for Disaster Reduction – World Health Organization 2008-09 Campaign on safer healthcare facilities
by Richard N. Bradley

Many recent emergencies highlight the need for hospitals that are safer and more resistant to disasters. After the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami of 2004, suffering and loss of life among those affected increased because of the number of healthcare facilities that failed as a result of the event. For example, of the 240 medical clinics in the Aceh Province of Indonesia, 30 were destroyed, 77 were seriously damaged, and another 40 had moderate damage. This type of loss of essential services in the aftermath of a disaster leaves the population feeling insecure and abandoned. Not only is an intact healthcare system necessary for the immediate and ongoing response to the emergency, but it is also essential for the recovery of the community and nation, as confidence in an intact healthcare system is an important part of the public’s perception that the situation is improving. The effectiveness of health and medical care during and after a crisis is a reflection of the care system is an important part of the public’s perception that the situation is improving.

The International Strategy for Disaster Reduction, an instrument of the United Nations General Assembly, and the World Health Organization have addressed the need for safer and more disaster-resistant healthcare facilities by making this priority the theme of their 2008 – 2009 biennial World Campaign on Disaster Reduction. The title of this campaign is “Hospitals Safe from Disasters.” Its objectives are to:

1. protect the lives of patients and health care workers by ensuring the structural resilience of health facilities;
2. make sure health facilities and healthcare services are able to function in the aftermath of emergencies and disasters, when they are most needed; and
3. improve the risk reduction capacity of the healthcare system, including emergency management.

An effective disaster preparedness plan involves four components. These include mitigation, planning, response, and recovery. Mitigation is perhaps the most important step. It is defined as any sustained action taken to reduce or eliminate long-term risk to life and property from a hazard event. Mitigation planning is a process that involves organizing resources, assessing risks, and developing, implementing, and monitoring mitigation plans. The Hospitals Safe from Disasters Campaign will put mitigation into practice though public education and dissemination of educational materials.

Hospital and governmental leaders will face some challenges as they take on this important task of creating safer hospitals. Many people perceive that building facilities that are resistant to disasters will be prohibitively expensive. While this may be true for some major renovations, there are many valuable interventions that have only a modest cost. Adding effective mitigation features into the design and construction of a new hospital should add only about four percent to the overall cost of the project. Regardless of the intervention planned to make a hospital safer, “the most costly hospital is the one that fails.”

Nevertheless, when hospitals do fail in the aftermath of a disaster, it is often due to functional collapse and not structural damage. Thus, healthcare facilities must plan for not only structural, but also operational resilience. Mitigation efforts should not be implemented by only a few motivated personnel; effective planning must be performed by a multi-disciplinary team. To accomplish this, the executive of each healthcare facility must identify hazard mitigation as an institutional priority.

Disaster mitigation planning teams have several specific tasks to accomplish. One of the most important of these will be to conduct a risk and vulnerability assessment. An effective risk mitigation plan must always be based on a clear understanding of the most significant threats. Another significant task for disaster planning teams will be to create or revise the facility’s emergency management plan. This plan must address how the facility will deal with the significant threats identified during the vulnerability assessment. In case the facility does face an extreme situation, the plan must also include procedures for safe evacuation of patients when necessary. The team will also develop a training plan that will ensure that healthcare workers are familiar with the emergency procedures. A final step is to implement a schedule of exercises and evaluations of the emergency management plan. The results of these evaluations will take the team back to the beginning of the cycle with further revisions of the emergency plan.

Implementation guidance and other excellent information regarding the ISDR/WHO Initiative on Hospitals Safe from Disasters is available from http://www.unisdr.org/eng/public_aware/world_camp/2008-2009/

References:
5. Connell, R.P., Disaster mitigation in hospitals: factors influencing organizational decision-making on hazard loss reduction, in Department of Sociology. 2003, University of Delaware.