



Health Care Workers' Response to Catastrophic Disasters

Additional Articles Relevant to Anniversary of 9/11 and Its Aftermath

NEW YORK CITY, September 7, 2005—Health care professionals are on the front lines of urban disasters and are expected to respond quickly and effectively to many kinds of emergencies. Under these types of situations, however, tensions may exist between professional and personal commitments. A recent report from *The Journal of Urban Health* shows that health care workers' ability and willingness to respond to emergencies depends on the type of disaster.

From a survey conducted by the Mailman School of Public Health, the authors found that health care workers were **most able** to report to work for a mass casualty incident (83%), environmental disaster (81%), and chemical events (71%). They were **least able** to report during a smallpox epidemic (69%), radiological event (64%), sudden acute respiratory distress syndrome (SARS) outbreak (64%), or severe snow storm (49%). Barriers to the ability to report included transportation problems, child care, eldercare, and pet care obligations.

In terms of willingness, health care workers were **most willing** to report during a snow storm (80%), a mass casualty incident (86%), and environmental disaster (84%). They were **least willing** to report for duty during a SARS outbreak (48%), radiological event (57%), smallpox epidemic (61%), or chemical event (68%). Barriers to willingness included fear for personal safety, concern for family, and personal health problems.

The study was conducted among 6,428 workers from 47 health care facilities in the greater New York City Metropolitan area. Facilities included acute care hospitals, long term care facilities and community clinics. The hospitals in the study were both teaching and non-teaching, and ranged in size from less than 200 beds to more than 600 beds. The findings were consistent for all types and sizes of facilities. Dr. Kristine Qureshi, the lead author said, "many of the barriers identified are amenable to intervention." For example, pre-disaster plans can be developed for the transportation of medical staff, and adjustment of staff schedules can be arranged so that staff can share among themselves child, elder, or pet care responsibilities. Additionally, health care workers can aid the public in developing personal emergency plans."

While this study surveyed concerns of health workers in anticipating a disaster, actual follow-through may be another factor. Dr. Robyn R. Gershon, another investigator on this study noted, "An earlier study by our group questioned public health nurses in New York City regarding barriers for responding during disasters. Ninety percent reported at least one barrier, including similar issues regarding family responsibilities, such as child, elder and pet care."

Dr. Kristine Qureshi is currently assistant professor in the department of epidemiology in the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. Dr. Robyn R. Gershon is associate professor of sociomedical sciences at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. In addition to Drs. Qureshi and Gershon, additional members on the report included M.F. Sherman, T. Straub, E. Gebbie, M. McCollum, M.J. Erwin, and S.S. Morse, published in *The Journal of Urban Health* (vol. 82, no. 3, Sept. 2005)

The Journal is a quarterly publication of The New York Academy of Medicine and is edited by David Vlahov, PhD and director of the Academy's Center for Urban Epidemiologic Studies. Another article in the journal, that is relevant as background information to Hurricane Katrina, relates to problems after a natural disaster, specifically the issue of substance abusers after the Bam Earthquake. Articles in the current issue, relevant to the anniversary of September 11, include "Cardiac Events in New Jersey after the September 11, 2005 Terrorist Attack" and "PTSD and Depression

Among Displaced Chinese Workers after the World Trade Center Attack: A Follow-up Study." The Journal rounds out its September offerings with articles on the injury prevention in children and adolescents, articles on drug use and prevention, and several articles on HIV. For article abstracts, click [here](#).

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EDITORS: Interviews with Drs. Qureshi and Gershon are available by appointment. Call Maria Dering, 212-873-6715 (The New York Academy of Medicine) or Stephanie Berger, 212-305-4372 (The Mailman School of Public Health).

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