How Preparedness Works: Three Scenarios Drawn from the Field

A flood of donated medicines – some past their expiration date and many marked only with brand names – had to be sorted laboriously during the aftermath of the Mexico City earthquake. Medicines should always be labelled with generic names and should have expiration dates that run beyond anticipated relief efforts.

WHO sees the International Decade for Natural Disaster Reduction as an opportunity to strengthen the health sector's preparedness and response capacity. The three scenarios that follow show that even basic preparedness measures can go a long way when disaster strikes.

Short-wave radios and improved training:

A purchase of short-wave radios allows rural health workers to report an ominous rise in meningococcal cases in a sub-Sahelian African country. Having learned the lessons of a previous meningitis epidemic when 10 000 people had to be hospitalized, the national manager of vaccine stores dispatches 50 000 doses of meningitis vaccine to cities in rural areas. An emergency immunization campaign is quickly undertaken.

Improved training of health workers in diagnosing the illness, combined with a better equipped laboratory and the short-wave radios that allow the health workers to communicate quickly with national health authorities, prevents thousands of meningitis cases.

An electrical generator and reserve supplies:

A violent tropical storm cuts a swath of destruction across an isolated island in the South Pacific, injuring many people and causing considerable damage to the island's buildings and roads. High winds knock down electrical lines, blacking out the island.

But because the local health authorities have planned for such emergencies, a doctor can carry out life-saving surgery on injured islanders. A stand-by generator purchased in response to electricity loss during the last such storm ensures a reliable supply of electricity, and a stock of important drugs and medical supplies kept in reserve for just such emergencies keeps the hospital well-stocked and functioning.

A computer program for a relief effort:

In the aftermath of an earthquake in a South American country, the central medical store manager reviews a computer print-out of the medicines that have arrived from nearby countries. A simple computer program allows him to monitor and distribute the drugs that are being received. By matching the actual needs to offers of help, and by regulating the supply lines, the manager helps the relief effort proceed smoothly.

The smooth operation is in stark contrast to the chaos of a relief effort after an earlier earthquake. Much personnel time had been diverted from practical relief work to sort tons of unneeded supplies airlifted in by well-meaning donors.

Learning from the chaos of the previous earthquake, national health ministry officials had prepared a list of priority supplies which would be needed in disasters. The list was then sent to neighbouring countries and possible donors and linked into the computer program. The result is a smoother relief operation, with the appropriate medical supplies getting to where they are needed and increased efficiency in the overall effort.