

# INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON DISASTER MITIGATION IN HEALTH FACILITIES

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## IS YOUR HOSPITAL SAFE?

Rescue workers digging through mountains of rubble to reach those trapped after the collapse of the Juárez Hospital in the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City is an image that few of us will forget. In the Hospital General, 295 people died, and in the Hospital Juárez, 561 died among whom were patients, medical staff, and visitors. As a result of that earthquake nearly 6,000 beds were put out of service in Mexico City and the economic cost to medical facilities alone was estimated at over \$US 640 million.

During Hurricane Gilbert in 1988, two hospitals were completely destroyed in Jamaica, and 11 suffered severe damage. More than half of the 377 secondary health care facilities on the island were seriously damaged.

The largest number of deaths during the San Fernando, California, earthquake in 1971 occurred as a result of the collapse of two hospitals, and two other hospitals were rendered completely inoperable.

Comparable losses have been repeated throughout the Region. Such tragedies are often seen as unavoidable, and as isolated cases occurring because of the unfortunate convergence of multiple factors. Post-disaster analysis will point to unique subsoil conditions, to miscalculations of a storm's path, to a facility's age, or to the fact that the quake or hurricane hit during peak visiting hours at a hospital. But scientific knowledge about these factors exists and is on the increase, and this information must be applied to the maintenance, planning, and expansion of a community's facilities.

In the event of mass casualties, acute care facilities are more critical to disaster response than health centers, and by the complex nature of their services, their high level of occupancy, and the characteristics of their equipment and supplies, they are more vulnerable. While a house might still be habitable even after losing part of its roof or connections to water and power, a hospital must be self-sustaining if the major systems of a community's infrastructure fail. Structural damage to a hospital which could require its evacuation converts a vital resource into a liability. And in the worst case, that of total collapse, the community's lifeline can become the most dangerous of all places to be.