

Abstracts and Reports

DISASTER PREPAREDNESS AND RELIEF NURSING IN THE CARIBBEAN

by Grace Allman Burke¹

On Wednesday, 29 August 1979, Hurricane David struck the Island of Dominica in the Caribbean with 150 mile-per-hour winds, causing widespread devastation and many casualties. Eleven senior nurses from the region and four PAHO nursing advisers (including the author), who were present at the time to attend a regional nursing conference, rendered important assistance to hurricane victims. Their experience has stimulated disaster preparedness and training activities throughout the Caribbean for nursing and other health-personnel.

Introduction

On Sunday, 26 August 1979, the Meteorological Office of Barbados warned that a hurricane was approaching and that some of the Windward Islands, including Dominica, might be affected. Reports of the hurricane's progress continued to be broadcast by national and regional radio stations over the next two days.

During that period, all reports indicated that Barbados would be the direct target of the hurricane. The storm was described as very dangerous, and was said to be travelling at a relatively slow rate of speed. On Tuesday, 28 August, the islands of Saint Lucia, Martinique, and Dominica were placed officially on a hurricane alert.

Early in the morning of 29 August, Dominica began receiving strong winds and heavy rains. Weather reports on Radio Dominica advised all people to remain indoors and to avoid trying to attend work unless absolute-

ly necessary. Dominican nurses advised delegates to the Regional Nursing Conference, then underway on the island capital of Roseau, that they would be unable to attend the sessions scheduled for that day at the hotel conference site because of these warnings.

By 9:00 A.M. weather conditions had started to become alarming. Conference delegates at the hotel sought advice from hotel staff members as to the safest place to wait out the storm. They were advised that the conference room would be the best place.

At 10:00 A.M. the full force of Hurricane David struck Dominica. Weather conditions were beyond control. The noise of the wind and the nearby sea was overwhelming. Galvanized metal sheets ripped from various parts of the hotel's roof sailed off and crashed to the ground. The radio station went off the air. The rain became extremely heavy. Trees in front of the hotel and within the hotel grounds were uprooted and felled. People could be seen running past the hotel, and some sought shelter inside. Fear and anxiety set in. Spiritual guidance was sought and prayers were offered.

¹Caribbean Area Nursing Adviser, Pan American Health Organization, P.O. Box 508, Bridgetown, Barbados.