

RESPONSES TO EMERGENCIES IN MEXICO AND CENTRAL AMERICA

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A radiation emergency is defined as an unforeseen occurrence, either actual or suspected, involving exposure to or contamination by ionizing radiation. Persons who are exposed may require medical attention ranging from first aid to third-level specialized attention.

Radiation emergencies have two main aspects: radiation safety, which concerns control of the radiation source, and, more importantly, health effects, which entail diagnoses, treatment, and rehabilitation. The physician participates directly in a radiation emergency because he or she is the professional who knows best the human body and the methodology to re-establish health. However, because these types of incidents are infrequent, many physicians are poorly prepared to deal with such emergencies.

Two main aspects of emergency response plans are: (1) prevention, including public education for behavior and planning for appropriate response; and (2) application, including prophylactic measures, assessing the extent of exposure and contamination, controlling public anxiety, and managing and treating the victims.

During many emergencies, people are apt to lose confidence in some authority figures, such as the mayor or governor. They do, however, accept and will cooperate with the health authority, for example, the ministry of health, the hospital or community doctor, or the international organization, because all their decisions lead to providing social protection.

I would like to suggest that the AMA provide information about diagnosis and treatment in radiation emergencies to university teachers and also support collaboration and educational centers such as Radiation Emergency Assistance Center/Training Site (REAC/TS) at national and international levels; that there be a group of experts formed who would collaborate with the regulatory authorities at the decision-making level, because information and communication are vital and because such decisions have a political basis; and that press interviews be undertaken with care because of the psychosocial consequences to the local, national, and international communities.

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