

STATE GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN RESPONSE TO
RADIATION EMERGENCIES

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On behalf of state health officers, I would like to commend and thank the American Medical Association and its cooperating and cosponsoring agencies for bringing together this broad range of interested parties. I am honored to participate. There are a number of advantages to being 41st of 42 speakers at this Conference. Having heard the previous speakers certainly helps me focus my remarks so that I will not duplicate information you have already received. But it also is like being last in the batting order and watching the big hitters get the big hits on the important issues. From my seat on the bench, it sometimes has looked as if some of those hitters were using their bats on each other! Especially pertinent is the question of what discipline should be calling the shots in a radiation emergency.

I will focus primarily on three topics: (1) the role of public health agencies and state government in defining and interpreting risks to the public; (2) the role of state health and nuclear safety agencies in preparing for radiation emergencies and how such a plan is structured in one particularly vulnerable state, my own; and (3) problems we currently face in Illinois in assuring an effective response even with a well-developed plan in place.

RISKS TO THE PUBLIC

One of the basic functions of public health is to interpret risks to the public. We human beings always have lived with risks and have coped as best we can, according to our perceptions of the relative dangers and the protective mechanisms available to us. Being conscious of risks helps us to confront and cope with them, but it also has negative effects. The multiplicity of threats and the urgency with which they are presented often make it difficult to sort out those that we as individuals can control from those that we cannot. Consequently, we are in danger of surrendering to feelings of helplessness and apathy, which can paralyze us and prevent us from coping even in situations in which personal action can make a difference.

Interpreting risks to the public is one of the public health professional's most important and most common responsibilities. Often we have the opportunity to inform, educate, and motivate. An excellent example is radiation risks. One of the greatest potential dangers posed by nuclear power today is the widespread tendency to ignore its hazards,

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