



## Preparing the Staff

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We've learned one thing from every medical disaster we've ever been through—whether pandemic flu, a smallpox epidemic, an outbreak of SARS, or the attacks of September eleven. And that one thing is this: that emergency planning on the part of the medical community is an absolute essential. One important aspect of preparing your practice for an emergency is knowing the personal readiness of your staff.

No preparedness plan can ignore the fact that, in an emergency, some staff members may be less accessible, less able, or even less willing to shoulder the burden than others. A recent study of over six thousand healthcare workers analyzed willingness to respond versus ability to respond. The study found that healthcare workers would be most willing to help out in a mass casualty incident or an environmental disaster. They would be least willing to respond to a smallpox epidemic, a radiological event, or an outbreak of SARS.

It's not surprising that fear of disease—or fear of spreading it to their families and loved ones—would be a deal breaker for many healthcare workers. Understandably, even physicians, who were the most likely to respond to all types of emergency events, expressed concern about endangering their families. It pays to know your staff members' particular fears and responsibilities in the event of disaster. And before drawing up your emergency plan, you should have an “Are you willing?” dialogue with every member of your staff.

One of the first steps in opening that “willingness” dialogue is to reassure your staff that a pandemic plan is in place and that proper protective equipment is on hand and ready to go. Talking about staff and physician protection is a good way to reassure them ahead of time and boost their confidence level.

A tabletop talk-through is a good way to find out what each staff member's personal situation may be, so that you can have a realistic expectation about who will be able to work and who will have to stay home in an emergency situation. Encourage them to discuss their concerns and fears about various kinds of emergencies. During that discussion, ask them these questions: What will we do if a high percentage of our staff members are sick or unable to work? Under what circumstances should the practice close? And what is each staff member's family emergency plan? Do they have adequate child care arrangements for their families?

Once you understand how their personal situations may affect their ability to help out, make certain that they are prepared for the job. One way is to survey your staff to make sure that everyone is up to date on vaccinations. Find out who might need a pneumonia or pneumococcal vaccine. In addition, the Centers for Disease Control recommend flu vaccine for all healthcare workers.

Another smart preparation is to switch to direct deposit of employees' paychecks if your practice hasn't already done so. Direct deposit would be very helpful during a pandemic, when people would want to avoid human contact as much as possible. Employees can be spared

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having to go to their local banks to deposit a paycheck, assuming some banks remain open. Direct deposit may also facilitate unemployment payments if those should become necessary.

Another step in staff preparation is drilling. No matter how much your staff may groan about them, the fact is, drills work. When the alarm goes off, they will know what to do. And preparation for one type of emergency strengthens the staff response even if the emergency that actually happens is quite different from the drill.

A tabletop drill is a good launching pad for an actual drill. That discussion can cover the question of how the practice will notify staff and patients of an emergency situation. What methods of crowd control will you use? How will the practice get more supplies if needed? How will prescription drug shortages be addressed? What happens to routine appointments? Will the practice use volunteers to augment the staff? How will the practice contain the disease and protect the staff during the crisis?

Once you've done the tabletop drill, schedule the live drill shortly after people have reviewed their roles to ensure that things go smoothly. If the first drill doesn't go well, go ahead and schedule another one. Once you've got the planned drill down, it's time to go ahead with an unplanned one—but don't rush into it before everyone is comfortable with his or her role. With a confident staff that knows how to work together in an emergency situation, your preparedness plan will be off to a very good start.

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