

# Responding to the Terrorism Requires Preparation

By Robin Suits

Although almost two years have passed since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, America's "war on terrorism" seems to have become a way of life for the foreseeable future. Those on the front lines of the public health community recognize that they must remain vigilant in a world where a physical, biological, chemical, or nuclear attack is an ever-present possibility.

At Wright State University School of Medicine, the Department of Emergency Medicine has taken a key role in helping prepare the Miami Valley for responding to terrorism and other mass-casualty events.

In collaboration with the Dayton Regional Hazardous Materials Response Team and the Weapons of Mass Destruction Division of the Dayton Fire Department, the department has been offering regular programs for area physicians on disaster management and response to biological, chemical, and nuclear threats. The sessions were developed in collaboration with the National Disaster Education Coalition, which includes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) as well as academic, military, and private sector partners.

The monthly programs are designed to familiarize physicians with weapons of mass destruction, including biologic agents such as smallpox, anthrax, plague, and tularemia; chemical agents such as sarin gas, VX nerve gas, and cyanide; and nuclear agents, according to Mark Gebhart, M.D., assistant professor of emergency medicine and EMS coordinator for the Emergency Medicine Residency Program. The sessions also include information on how to properly decontaminate patients and how health care providers can protect themselves.

"The local medical community has come forward to help the community with this potentially devastating scenario," Dr. Gebhart said. "For example, the Montgomery County Medical Society has partnered with the Department of Emergency Medicine to develop a physician disaster pool program. "Physicians from across the spectrum of medical specialties have come forward to volunteer their time and expertise in the event of any disaster."

The School of Medicine also is working with the Greater Dayton Area Hospital Association's Regional Domestic Preparedness Task Force, the

National Pharmaceutical Stockpile Program, the Urban Search and Rescue Team, and the Dayton Area Metropolitan Medical Response System to prepare for possible terrorist attacks.

The Division of Health Systems Management in the Wright State Department of Community Health has been working in partnership with the southwestern division of the Association of Ohio Health Commissioners to develop a comprehensive, graduate level program to help prepare the public health work force for responding to terrorism and other mass casualty events.

This past spring, Richard J. Schuster, M.D., Oscar Boonshoft chair of the division, led a team of faculty in offering a course on epidemiology, with a special focus on bioterrorism issues, for public health professionals from the 19-county region. In addition, the division will be offering workshops on bioterrorism issues to public health workers, including physicians in the region, during the months of June and July. The division sees the epidemiology course as one of several core courses it hopes to develop in a broader public health program at the graduate level.

Following the events of Sept. 11, 2001, the Division of Medical Education of the Association

of American Medical Colleges (AAMC) convened a panel, funded through an AAMC-CDC cooperative agreement, to make recommendations to medical schools about what might be included in medical student undergraduate curricula concerning responses to any potential attack.

While students must learn the medical facts surrounding any mass-casualty episode, they must also understand how the public health infrastructure will swing into action, according to Deborah Danoff, M.D., AAMC associate vice president for medical education and liaison to the panel. "There will need to be a pulling together of the medical, public health, and first responder communities," Dr. Danoff said. "Medical students will need to learn how to work within teams of existing networks and public health organizations."

Wright State School of Medicine faculty already are looking into having third- and fourth-year medical students take part in the disaster response teams that have been organized. "We're also in the initial stages of developing a preparedness curriculum that would be Internet-based and run over the four full years of medical school," said Glenn Hamilton, M.D., chair of the Department of Emergency Medicine.

The first-of-its-kind program would require medical students to complete modules relating to nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) agents and/or disaster as appropriate in other required courses. For example, during microbiology, a medical student might be required to complete an Internet module on smallpox.

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