

Hospital Preparedness for Epidemics

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Contents

1.	Introduction	2
2.	Management.....	7
3.	Infection prevention and control.....	14
4.	Communication.....	18
5.	Human resources	23
6.	Logistics	28
7.	Hospital pharmacy	32
8.	Hospital laboratory	36
9.	Concurrent emergencies.....	40
10.	Essential support services	44
11.	Continuity of essential health-care services	53
12.	Psychological and social support services.....	57
13.	Patient management.....	61
14.	Surge capacity	65
	Further reading	69

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Note to users

This guidance should be used as a general reference and in conjunction with other WHO publications, such as those on Ebola event management which can be found at <http://www.who.int/csr/disease/ebola/en/>, and those on emergency and disaster risk management for health, including safe hospitals which can be found at: <http://www.who.int/hac/techguidance/safehospitals/en/>

It is recommended that the contents of this document should be adapted to local risks, requirements, norms and practice.

It is WHO's intention to publish a final version of this guidance and to make it available in other UN official languages.

1. Introduction

Overall objectives

Hospitals and other healthcare facilities play a critical role in national and local responses to emergencies, such as communicable disease epidemics.¹ This document provides information on how these facilities can fulfil this role. Most of the actions required to prepare for epidemics apply, or can be adapted to, the management of other emergencies², such as mass casualties due to transport crashes, hydro-meteorological, geological or chemical disasters, and so on.

Hospitals which have already drawn up plans for managing epidemics can use this guide to review their preparedness and, if necessary, to update their epidemic response plans and their capacity to implement these plans. Hospitals which do not have response plans can use the guide to make a start in the planning process and in adjusting their plans to respond to an epidemic.

The main target audience for this guide is hospital management, hospital emergency committees and staff who have responsibility for establishing and maintaining the preparedness of hospitals for epidemics. The information is relevant for public, private, non-government and other hospitals. The wider audience are all stakeholders across many sectors including governments, health authorities, financial institutions, disaster management organizations and local suppliers which support and contribute to hospital preparedness, for example, through policy guidance, health sector and intersectoral coordination for emergency preparedness and response and provision of water, power and medical supplies and equipment.

Specific objectives

To ensure that:

- hospital management has established mechanisms for developing and implementing a Hospital Emergency Risk Management Programme³ designed to ensure the effective management of the risks of internal and external emergencies, including epidemics;

¹ In this document, the term *hospital* will be used to denote any healthcare facility.

² Unless otherwise stated, the term *emergency* will be used in this document and has a similar meaning to the term *disaster*.

³ A *Hospital Emergency Risk Management Programme* may be referred to as a *Hospital Emergency Preparedness and Response Programme*, *Disaster Management Programme* or similar.

- hospital management has established mechanisms for developing and implementing a Hospital Emergency Response Plan, which includes an Epidemic Sub-plan¹ for responding to the specific risks of an imminent or ongoing epidemic;
- hospital personnel are fully aware of their roles in preparing for, and responding to, an emergency, have been trained to perform the necessary actions, and are at the same time able to provide day-to-day hospital services, or have arrangements in place for deciding to suspend these services or refer patients to other health facilities in an emergency;
- the lines of communication needed to facilitate coordination of the overall response to an emergency will function effectively:
 - within and between the different departments of a hospital;
 - between hospital managers and staff and policy makers in public health authorities;
 - between different hospitals;
 - between hospitals, public health authorities and other healthcare entities;
 - between hospitals, the local health work force and the communities they serve,
 - between hospitals and emergency services, and local providers of water, power, waste management, transport and communication services, and medical supplies.
- hospitals are able to adapt to the specific challenges of an epidemic, whatever the nature of the disease and the resources needed, and even in the event of a concurrent emergency;
- appropriate resources are available in sufficient quantities and are likely to be used effectively despite problems associated with an epidemic, such as the potentially large number of people affected, community anxieties, misinformation and so on;
- due attention is paid to the physical, mental, emotional and social needs of hospital staff and their families during an epidemic;
- the emergency response builds on existing knowledge, practice, capabilities and capacities within the hospital, the health system and the community.

Appropriate strategies

Strategies for coping with epidemics should be part of an overall community and health sector response tailored to the specific circumstances of each individual hospital, such as:

- the hospital's existing plans and capacity to cope with epidemics (including implementation of measures to protect staff, patients and visitors from infection);

¹ A *Hospital Epidemic Sub-Plan* may also be referred to as a *Hospital Epidemic Contingency Plan*.

- the hospital's capacity to cope with the health demands from other types of emergencies, such as transport crashes, emergencies due to hydro-meteorological or chemical hazards, and acts of violence affecting the community;
- the range of general and specialized services the hospital normally provides, including care of patients with acute or chronic illnesses, laboratory services, community health outreach activities (immunization and antenatal care, for example), distribution and tracking of pharmaceutical and other medical supplies, and training of health personnel.

Potential pitfalls

Amplifying an epidemic

If a hospital has not put in place adequate measures to prevent and control infection, it may amplify an epidemic by spreading the infection to patients, staff and visitors. On leaving the hospital these infected individuals may boost transmission in the community and thereby thwart the hospital's overall epidemic response efforts.

Overwhelming demand for health care

Epidemics may overwhelm a hospital's capacity to deliver healthcare services. Human and material resources, including hospital space and medicines, may not be adequate to meet demand, particularly in the case of an epidemic lasting several weeks or months and particularly if concurrent emergencies are under way.

Overwhelming complexity

To contribute to efforts at controlling an epidemic the hospital must harness many of its functions and resources and must use them in a coordinated fashion. Meeting these requirements can be challenging. Hospitals are among the most complex institutions in a community. They are staffed by a multidisciplinary team delivering a multiplicity of health services to a highly diverse patient population generally suffering, collectively, from a wide range of health problems. An epidemic requires a health facility to alter its priorities and adapt

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