

The Future

This conference showcased a series of exciting innovations in medical response to homeland security threats. With so much progress being made on so many fronts, where will the future take us? Clearly, computers and electronic devices will continue to provide greater communication and monitoring capability in the future. Breakthroughs in physiology, pharmacology, and laboratory science will offer substantial improvements in disease detection and treatments. Training and education will increase the disaster response medical skills of lay people and health care providers. But perhaps the greatest strides forward may occur in our ability to organize ourselves, to network and partner between political or private groups, to enhance mutual capability. By working together, planning and exercising, sharing lessons learned and being accessible to support each other in times of crisis, we can give America the best possible protection from man-made and natural disaster. Most of this preparation is an intellectual one and does not involve large sums of money! It means we must have thought through the potential threats and have a mental plan of how to cope with them. Then we must have the outline of that plan written down and able to be implemented when we are called to do so!

The importance of the conference was to demonstrate that the future is here today, in terms of such innovations as fixed facilities and mobile units serving dual use applications, remote monitoring, rapid detection of bio-terrorism agents, and other “off-the-shelf” products. While we need to develop new technology for disaster response, the key to our future is use of advanced solutions that are available now. Every state has received millions of federal dollars, marked for homeland security initiatives, yet most have not built a coordinated state medical readiness plan. This conference highlighted the vulnerability of our medical facilities during a chemical or biological terrorist event. ‘Surge’ alternative facilities and mobile units can effectively address this problem. Connecticut and North Dakota have led the way, using both federal and state funds, and have built a plan and a vision that is available today.

Dr. Carlton noted that talking about our fears and our problems should lead to plans and preparations to put robust medical readiness of every state and the nation. Having a ‘dual-use’ solution that is used every workday, yet rapidly converted into a high-volume medical response tool during time of crisis, is both cost-effective and sustainable. Even without the terrorist threat, the need for access to health care is immense and a mobile solution meets both daily health care needs and medical readiness for natural and man-made disasters.

Summary

Improving the medical response to natural and man-made disaster is a difficult, endless task. Recent innovations in technology can enhance care and save lives. The availability of cost-efficient, self-sustaining, and dual-use 'surge' hospitals can allow communities large and small to better prepare for disaster. Networking and education, available from national, state, and local sources, can enhance preparation for disaster.

This conference provided real solutions, available today, from strategic planning, manufactured systems, innovations, educational training, and follow-up support. The technology, programs, and companies with experience are in place. The need is to implement the hardware and programs with realistic planning and exercises in each state and nationally.

Is the goal to be prepared idealistic? Of course. Can we make great progress toward it? Absolutely. Are many effective tools available and are they affordable? The answer provided by the conference is a resounding "yes". Too many have waited too long or simply have not known where or how to start. Each state will can anticipate further federal funding for homeland security, so now is the time to implement a medical readiness plan for each state, region, and the nation. This booklet, and the conference it describes, are attempts to provide direction and tools to facilitate medical readiness and a safer future for all citizens.

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