



Federal Health Matters

DoD Docs Assist in Tsunami Relief Effort

As of January 27, over 11,000 U.S. military personnel—including 8,691 on ships and 1,742 at the command center in Thailand—were involved in the international relief effort to aid the hundreds of thousands of people affected by the earthquake and resulting tsunami that hit Indonesia, Thailand, and other nearby nations on December 26. In addition to delivering relief supplies, participating in the recovery and identification of human remains, and assisting with engineering and clean-up projects, these efforts include deployment of medical personnel and equipment.

According to William Winkenwerder, Jr., MD, assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, this type of disaster creates a fertile breeding ground for such diseases as cholera, hepatitis A, measles, and malaria, and the DoD has been working with other government agencies, the United Nations, and the World Health Organization to determine what medical assistance is needed. On January 5, Winkenwerder said the military planned to send as many as eight portable hospitals to the area, including a 25-bed version that could be flown aboard two C-17 planes from Yokota air base in Japan. Additionally, the USNS Mercy, a 1,000-bed hospital normally used for combat

trauma, arrived in the U.S. 7th Fleet's area of responsibility on January 16. Initially, the ship will be staffed to support 250 patient beds, and the medical crew will be augmented by nongovernmental humanitarian workers.

At press time, U.S. military medical personnel had treated over 2,000 patients as part of the relief efforts. But in a speech at the recent TRICARE Conference in Washington, DC, Deputy Defense Secretary Paul D. Wolfowitz, who had just returned from a tour of the affected regions, estimated the effects of these service members to be even greater, saying that their efforts probably have saved “tens of thousands of lives.”

TRICARE Launches “Healthy Choices for Life” Campaign

In 2000, the CDC reported that the three most common causes of death in the United States were smoking, bad eating habits and physical inactivity, and alcohol abuse. While service members traditionally have been viewed as pillars of good health, the DoD acknowledges that men and women in uniform are just as likely as civilians to make unhealthy choices.

In response, on January 24, TRICARE launched its “Healthy Choices for Life” initiative, which

aims to build awareness of the importance of alcohol abuse reduction, tobacco cessation, and weight management among the health plan's 9.1 million beneficiaries. This initiative includes three demonstration projects—developed in collaboration with the seven uniformed services, the VA, and other federal agencies and operated by the Military Health System—each focused on one of the three key health issues. Two of the programs are web-based: an alcohol abuse prevention education program targeting 18- to 25-year-old active duty drinkers and a weight management support program for non-active duty, TRICARE Prime-enrolled beneficiaries over age 18 who have a body mass index greater than 25. The third program seeks to determine the efficacy of using a toll free, DoD-sponsored Tobacco Quit Line, along with pharmacotherapy and telephone- and internet-based behavioral counseling, to reach beneficiaries in noncatchment areas. Together, the projects were funded for \$13.2 million in fiscal year 2005 and will span two to three years.

By visiting the program's web site (www.tricare.osd.mil/healthychoices), service members can find validated and current health information, advice on healthy behaviors from Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs William Winkenwerder, Jr., MD and TRICARE Management Activity Chief Medical Officer David Thornberg, MD, and related web links.

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In addition, the site contains resources geared specifically toward such populations as military children and teens. Winkenwerder hopes that, “by focusing our efforts on identifying and preventing known causes of death, we will improve the quality of life for our beneficiaries, while saving health care dollars in the long run.”

Silicon Chips Detect Biowarfare Pathogens

Thanks to researchers at the Navy Medical Research Center in Silver

Spring, MD, it soon may be possible for medical workers in a field situation to determine rapidly whether troops have been exposed to an artificially enhanced biowarfare agent. In the December 17 issue of the journal *Genome Biology*, the researchers described their success in resequencing multiple strains of *Bacillus anthracis*, the source of anthrax infection, using microarray-based, high throughput technology.

The highly accurate method uses silicon chips seeded with millions of DNA fragments. “As long as a DNA sample is available to add to the chip,” explains lead researcher Commander Michael W. Zwick,

“one can quickly identify the specific strain, perform forensic attribution, and determine if there is evidence that the strain was genetically engineered.”

Because the microarray-based resequencing can be performed relatively easily and inexpensively, the researchers say the technology should be able to move out from specialized research institutions to military medical treatment facilities and, eventually, to the field. They also cite its potential usefulness in identifying common infectious diseases—such as influenza or severe acute respiratory syndrome—in addition to its biodefense applications. ●