

Call to action: Integrating student pharmacists, faculty, and pharmacy practitioners into emergency preparedness and response

Lisa Joanne Woodard, Brenda S. Bray, David Williams, and Colleen M. Terriff

Abstract

Objectives: To describe the pharmacist experience in emergency preparedness and response and to provide information and resources to help practitioners engage in this public health effort in their local communities.

Setting: Spokane, WA, health care community, 1998 through 2009.

Practice description: The College of Pharmacy at Washington State University, Spokane, has developed partnerships with local public health and community providers to address emergency preparedness and response needs. Working through the Metropolitan Medical Response System has created opportunities to participate in emergency preparedness planning and exercises. Collaboration with local agencies has provided opportunities for faculty and student pharmacists to respond to meet emergency needs in the community.

Practice innovation: Emergency preparedness and response education, training, and service implemented in partnership with public health and community providers prepared student pharmacists and experienced pharmacy practitioners to respond to emergency needs in our community.

Main outcome measures: Not applicable.

Results: Not applicable.

Conclusion: Colleges and schools of pharmacy can take a lead in preparing student pharmacists for this role by incorporating emergency preparedness training into curricula. Community pharmacists can develop their knowledge and skills in emergency preparedness through individualized continuing education plans and integration into community teams through volunteerism. Partnerships developed with local public health and emergency response agencies provide opportunities for pharmacists to become integral members of planning and response teams. Training exercises provide opportunities to test preparedness plans and provide professional education and experience. Actual emergency response activities demonstrate the value of the pharmacist as an important member of the emergency response team.

Keywords: Public health, emergency preparedness, emergency response, experiential training, collaboration, pharmacists, pharmacy education, collaborative practice.

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The pharmacist is a trusted health professional with great patient accessibility throughout our health care system. Pharmacy is the third largest health profession in the United States after nursing and medicine. More than 200,000 pharmacists currently serve the public in community pharmacies, hospitals, and other settings. Approximately 50,000 professional-degree student pharmacists are enrolled in Doctor of Pharmacy programs,¹ and only five states do not house 1 of 113 currently active Doctor of Pharmacy programs.² Upwards of 300,000 pharmacists or pharmacists-in-training are well positioned to respond to public health challenges.

The wide distribution of pharmacists in urban, suburban, and rural areas and their ready access to patients³ strategically positions pharmacy to apply professional competence in meeting critical needs in emergency preparedness and response. Involvement of pharmacists in local emergency preparedness planning has been documented in reports on the Omaha Metropolitan Medical Response System (MMRS)⁴ and the Spokane, WA, citywide preparedness plan.⁵ A compelling example of pharmacists in action can be found in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, during which pharmacists provided tri-

age, treatment, and refills for hundreds of patients displaced by the hurricane who needed chronic medications.⁶

Evidence suggests a substantial need to supplement the existing health care workforce with additional trained professionals in the event of a disaster or public health emergency. Recent studies have demonstrated that as little as 48% of the health care workforce might be available and actually report to work, depending on the nature of the disaster.^{7,8} The range across these studies is 48% to 98%, depending on locale and the nature of the emergency. Colleges and schools of pharmacy are fortuitously positioned to provide a potential reserve of trained individuals to respond to public health emergencies and to use the planning and training process, as well as actual emergency response, as opportunities to train student pharmacists and current practitioners.

Objectives

This article summarizes the experience of the Washington State University (WSU) College of Pharmacy (COP) as it implemented programs in partnership with public health and community providers to prepare student pharmacists and experienced pharmacy practitioners to respond to emergency needs in the community. We also provide information and resources to help practitioners engage in this public health effort in their local communities.

Pharmacists skilled to meet the challenge

The American Society of Health-System Pharmacists (ASHP) has recognized the key role that the pharmacist should play in the planning and execution of preparedness plans.⁹ Additionally, the impending possibility of an influenza pandemic brought several pharmacy organizations together to develop *A Pharmacist's Guide to Pandemic Preparedness*, which was published jointly in 2007 by the American Pharmacists Association (APhA), ASHP, and the National Association of Chain Drug Stores Foundation.¹⁰

These organizations recognize that pharmacists possess valuable skills that uniquely position them to play key roles in emergency preparedness, including:

- Developing diagnosis and treatment guidelines.
- Managing medication distribution systems.
- Managing health care system resources.
- Managing medication therapy of individuals.
- Addressing community communication needs.
- Delivering individualized education.

Meeting community needs

Spokane's MMRS

In 1996, the Department of Health and Human Services founded MMRS, which currently operates under the Department of Homeland Security. Spokane is 1 of 124 cities or jurisdictions across the country participating in this federally funded program. A multidisciplinary MMRS committee, with members from law enforcement, fire, hazardous materials, medical examiner's office, public health, hospital, transport/emergency medical services, and pharmacy, was formed. The committee

At a Glance

Synopsis: The Washington State University College of Pharmacy (COP) implemented programs in partnership with public health and community providers to prepare student pharmacists and pharmacy practitioners to respond to emergency needs in Spokane. COP was actively involved in planning and implementing the Washington State Bioterrorism Exercise in 2007, and the college was able to apply these skills during a real-life snow emergency in January 2008 and again during the recent H1N1 influenza pandemic. These experiences demonstrate that colleges and schools of pharmacy can prepare student pharmacists to engage in emergency preparedness and the value of the pharmacist as an important member of the emergency response team.

Analysis: Valuable lessons have been learned by COP during its collaborations with community partners during the previous several years, including the following: testing specific exercise objectives such as clinic set up, communications, or movement of resources is best done by keeping other elements of the test as simple as possible; assessing the community's response to triage and treatment/prophylaxis requires added complexity, such as pediatric and special-needs patients or two different medications; contacting pharmacies directly via telephone during normal business hours resulted in nearly 100% willingness to provide requested information, and the majority of pharmacies expressed willingness to participate further as needed; and the importance of possessing an open mind and willingness to step outside expected roles if needed.

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