

Regional Director's Message on World Health Day



This year's World Health Day theme focuses on health facilities in emergencies. The slogan "Save lives: make hospitals safe in emergencies" is a call that the health sector needs to heed.

It is also the theme of the biennial 2008–2009 global campaign by the International Strategy for Disaster Risk Reduction, which is being implemented with WHO and the World Bank.

The countries of our Region are not strangers to the havoc that disasters bring. During 1996–2005, natural disasters killed 536 176 people in the Region, which is 58% of the world's total deaths from disasters.

These disasters also profoundly affected health facilities and the communities that depend on them.

All health facilities, big or small, whether a primary health centre or a district hospital or a specialty referral centre, are in the frontline during an emergency. Health facilities are at risk from natural or human-generated hazards. In recent times, health facilities have also been targets of man-made violence. These facilities and the structures that support them need to be strengthened so that they continue to provide the needed services to the injured.

But what makes a health facility safe? There are three aspects: structural, nonstructural and functional.

1. Modern engineering and architectural science and design have already provided us with low-cost solutions for ensuring structural integrity, so that health facilities do not collapse during earthquakes or cyclones.
2. In some cases we have seen that although a health facility remains intact, it is rendered non-functional. Lifelines such as water and electricity must be backed up, equipment well secured and access and escape routes ensured.
3. Organizational aspects also play a role. A safe health facility has contingency plans and a well-trained health workforce that is ready and able to deal with the health consequences of emergencies.

Our Region has taken important steps to make health facilities safe in disasters and save lives. The 12 South-East Asia Region Benchmarks for Emergency Preparedness included the issue of safe health facilities. It is a complete set of standards, indicators, and checklists to guide Member States and institutions in improving existing health facilities and ensuring that new ones are built to withstand disasters. WHO is committed to supporting countries in achieving this benchmark.

The Safe Hospitals Index developed by WHO/PAHO is another tool that can be applied. From Nepal and Indonesia more nationally adapted tools have been produced to measure the safety of health facilities so that decision-makers can prioritize actions.

The most significant effort we have seen on this issue is structural and nonstructural vulnerability assessments of hospitals and blood banks in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal, conducted by WHO in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the National Society for Earthquake Technology, Nepal.

Global scenarios are changing. Our own development is pushing our health facilities to their limits. Rapid urbanization and migration are themselves looming emergencies for the environment and its inhabitants; climate change, where there is no predictable scenario, will also require health facilities to perform during extreme weather events.

For all these reasons it is vital that we discuss the safety of hospitals not only within the health sector but also outside it. Thus, other sectors and players have to be involved. And, as community members, we need to be fully aware of the issues, and be strong advocates to create the necessary awareness among decision-makers. Financial institutions should also lend a hand in ensuring that the infrastructure projects they support are disaster-resilient, including health facilities.

I hope that this year's World Health Day will help to highlight that health concerns should be the primary motivation behind any action to reduce disaster risks. It is, therefore, all the more important for the health sector to play a pivotal role in catalysing disaster reduction at the local, national and international levels. Let us remember that safe health facilities mean lives saved.

Thank you.



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