



Message from Dr Ala Alwan

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Don't let hospitals become a casualty of disasters

As news of a disaster or emergency reaches the global community, our thoughts turn immediately to the human consequences; and at the forefront are concerns for the health and wellbeing of the disaster-stricken population. For decades, the World Health Organization has worked to save lives and reduce suffering in times of crises. One way in which this is accomplished is by strengthening the capacity and resilience of health facilities, health systems and countries to mitigate and manage disasters.

For this reason, I am pleased that WHO is partnering with the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) on the 2008-2009 World Disaster Reduction Campaign on Hospitals Safe from Disasters.

The message of this Campaign is clear: when hospitals, health facilities or health systems fail in disaster and emergency situations, whether for structural or functional reasons, the result is the same: they are not available to treat the victims at precisely the moment they are most needed.

The 168 countries that adopted the Hyogo Framework for Action in 2005 recognized the importance of “making hospitals safe from disasters by ensuring that all new hospitals are built with a level of resilience that strengthens their capacity to remain functional in disaster situations and implement mitigation measures to reinforce existing health facilities, particularly those providing primary health care.” Yet despite significant strides to recognize and correct the problem, in some parts of the world an alarming number of health facilities - from large complex hospitals in megacities to small rural clinics that may be the only source of health care – are still built in highly disaster-prone areas. In other regions, emergencies and crises continue to leave health facilities unable to function, depriving communities of the care they need.

Hospitals and health facilities are about much more than bricks and mortar. They are home to critical health services such as public health laboratories, blood banks, rehabilitation facilities or pharmacies. They are the setting in which health workers work tirelessly to ensure the highest level of service. Their importance extends far beyond their role in saving lives and safeguarding public health in the aftermath of disasters. Health facilities have a symbolic social and political value and contribute to a community's sense of security and wellbeing. As such, they must be protected from the avoidable consequences of disasters, emergencies and other crises.

Today, we have learned that with current knowledge, a strong political commitment and even with limited resources in developing countries, it is possible to protect health facilities from such adverse events.

The World Health Organization, through its six regional offices across the world, is committed to seeing this become reality. Please join us in tackling this challenge, which is essential to meeting the Millennium Development Goals.