



Message from Mr Sálvamo Briceño

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A safety net for everyone, at all times

When disasters strike, aid agencies, communities, the media, and governments focus immediately on the victims. But if our focus on victims is to have real meaning, we must prioritize a deeper understanding and support of medical care.

Those who are injured need urgent medical attention, but those who escape injury have not escaped the long-term need for medical care and public health after the disaster is forgotten. When health services and hospitals fail due to disaster, people die and suffer needlessly both during the disaster and long into the future.

Health sector damage can cause devastating secondary disasters. For example, the December 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami disaster affected entire national healthcare systems and millions of beneficiaries, particularly the poor, at an untold cost. It damaged 61% of health facilities in northern Aceh province, and killed approximately 7% of its health workers and 30% of its midwives. As a consequence, Aceh's primary care, maternal health and neonatal care was sent into a crisis, and public health system recovery has required intensive investment.

From a human perspective, all disasters are a health issue, and damage to health systems affects every part of society and nations as a whole. As such, everyone should be made aware of the importance of the issue and be committed to helping ensure that hospitals and health facilities are resistant to natural hazards. Awareness and commitment are the major ingredients: awareness and commitment from both policy/decision makers and the public at large.

The difference in expense between building a safe and an unsafe hospital can be negligible. But that tiny investment can be the difference between life and death, or between a community's impoverishment and its sustainable development.

Because of this, the secretariat of the International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UN/ISDR) and the World Health Organization (WHO), with some support from the World Bank, are dedicating the 2008-2009 World Disaster Reduction Campaign to 'Hospitals Safe from Disasters.' As in the education sector, UNICEF's role in the health sector will also be very important in this Campaign.

The Campaign's objectives are to effect change that helps to: (1) protect the lives of patients and health workers by ensuring the structural resilience of health facilities; (2) make sure health facilities and health services are able to function in the aftermath of emergencies and disasters - when they are most needed; (3) improve the risk reduction capacity of health workers and institutions, including emergency management.

As disaster risk reduction is everyone's business, and unsafe hospitals are potentially damaging to everyone, I would like to call on all members of our global community – decision makers, decision implementers and the public at large – to join the Campaign.