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Clinic offers care for Katrina victims

Ibn Sina makes plans to deal with increased patient care

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Officials with Ibn Sina Foundation Medical Centers have offered an extensive overview of special problems they encountered during six months of caring for Hurricane Katrina evacuees.

They also have recommendations for meeting future disasters.

Their objective is to help the city, state and nation be better prepared for future crises involving evacuee populations, said Dr. Aijaz Ali Khowaja, who heads medical operations at the foundation's main clinic, 11246 S. Wilcrest Drive in southwest Houston.

"Katrina was an unfortunate disaster — one that took the whole nation by surprise," Khowaja said. "We did not anticipate the large number — and the wide variety of medical and health-related problems that we faced with the evacuees. We have to be better prepared for the future."

Khowaja said the biggest problem is that the city needs more primary care clinics for the indigent and uninsured; clinics that can offer medical assistance to large number of people displaced by natural or man-made disasters.

"We need to invest more resources into primary care facilities so we can be ready for future events like this," he said.

As of last month, Ibn Sina Community Medical Centers had treated 114 evacuees for a wide range of medical and dental needs.

Ninety-nine percent of them were uninsured and fewer than half were able to pay the \$25 office fee.

So far, the foundation has incurred \$24,000 in costs for providing free and reduced medical care for Katrina victims.

A volunteer doctor at the clinic, Dr. Dilawar Ajani, played a key role in the effort by providing more than \$5,000 worth of medicine samples, the bulk of which was from his own medical practice.

Among the more than 150,000 Katrina evacuees who found shelter in Houston — including some 25,000 school-aged children — many came with little or no money and without jobs. In addition to shelter, they needed medical attention.

"Their injuries and ailments offered a snapshot into their world," Khowaja said.

The evacuees came with an assortment of existing medical problems, which were compounded by days of being without treatment and access to medical supplies and prescription medication.

They also went for days without proper nutrition, and in some cases had consumed contaminated water or spoiled food.

"These experiences can lead to gastrointestinal problems, diarrhea and vomiting," Khowaja said.

Many suffered injuries during the trek from their washed-out homes to crowded makeshift shelters and bus rides out of town. Back home, their medical records were lost and health care providers could not be contacted for information.

"We had people with broken bones and open wounds from accidents they had getting out of their homes," Khowaja said. "People who already had chronic conditions, such as diabetes, hypertension or thyroid conditions, had no medicine or prescriptions with them.

"We had difficult decisions to make with children going to school needing vaccinations. Many had not had their shots, and some weren't sure which shots they had had because they could not get to their medical records," he added.

Doctors at the clinic said they were particularly concerned about pregnant women.

For some women, being treated following the hurricane was the only medical treatment they'd had for awhile, Khowaja said.

"Another woman learned she had breast cancer, but she had no gainful employment or health insurance and her husband was unemployed," he said. "We immediately referred her for follow-up and treatment to Ibn Sina's friend and collaborator, The Rose breast clinic."

Among the evacuees treated by the clinic, 85 percent of the women were overweight and obese, and 62 percent had high cholesterol. The rate of diabetes was seven times higher than the national average, Khowaja said.

"In addition to physical injuries, children had insect bites and open wounds made worse by infection. Many children and adults needed Tetanus vaccine due to injuries sustained during their flight," he said.

Some patients had mental health conditions that were untreated, while others suffered mental exhaustion, fatigue, severe anxiety and depression as a result of the experience. Some children and elderly persons were traumatized, he said.

Khowaji said there were not sufficient resources to handle mobility-impaired and mentally retarded persons.

Recommendations made

The Ibn Sina Foundation's report of recommendations for future disaster preparedness includes the following:

- Special arrangements should be made for those with thyroid and renal problems and liver disease.
- Sufficient medicine, drugs and supplies should be made available to handle existing diseases.
- Supplies of flu shots and tetanus doses and Hepatitis A vaccine should be available to prevent injury-related problems.
- Pregnant women need prenatal care support; accessible obstetric care facilities need to be identified.
- A referral system should be established to treat women's hidden health problems, such as breast and cervical cancers.
- Preparations should be made to treat children for diseases caused by insect and rodent bites.
- Ample supplies of vaccine, inhalation and oxygen with anti-asthmatic drugs should be stocked.
- Clinics treating evacuees should have extra supplies for immediate care, including suturing material, antiseptic dressing material, provision for procedure rooms in a clinical setting along with X-ray facility.
- Clinics should be prepared to treat and refer patients for mental health problems, including existing conditions and anxiety and depression caused by evacuees' personal tragedies, loss of sleep and stress of dislocation.
- Information networks should be expanded for handling medical insurance and accessing patients' information.
- The community needs more clinics for non- and underinsured patients, and coordination between these clinics.

While Ibn Sina Foundation waits for others to boost local resources for disaster victims, plans are under way to expanding its own southwest Houston facilities to care for under-served populations.

Adjacent to its current location on Wilcrest, the foundation plans to build a new facility at Wilcrest and Stancliff Road.

The first phase is projected to be finished in December. The second phase should be completed over the next three to five years, said Nasru Rupani, a local businessman who serves on the foundation's board of directors.

Phase One, estimated to cost some \$1.5 million, will be a one-story structure with 5,000 square feet of interior space and 25,000 square feet of exterior space for parking and other amenities.

Services will include primary care, immunizations, diagnostics, screenings, gynecology, urology, cardiology, well-baby and mother care, ophthalmology, pharmacy, X-ray and dental care.

Imaging services and ultrasound will be added in Phase Two.

The clinic's expansion is funded by the city of Houston (\$500,000), Cullen Trust for Health Care (\$80,000), Rockwell Foundation (\$25,000) and the Houston Foundation (\$5,000).

Funds for physicians' malpractice insurance will be provided by the federal Bureau of Primary Health Care with funds from the Health & Human Services Administration.

"The federal government will be able to provide \$20,000 per year to cover physicians and doctors for malpractice insurance at no cost," Rupani said.

When new facilities are operational, the existing clinic can retain some existing health care operations and also function as a community wellness education center, Rupani said.

The foundation also operates a clinic at 15132 Old Galveston Road (Texas 3) in the Clear Lake area. Call 281-990-7462 for information.