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LESSON LEARNED

Quarantine and Isolation: Medical Personnel Refusing to Treat Patients

SUMMARY

During a large-scale infectious disease outbreak, some medical workers may refuse to treat infected patients. Federal and state public health officials should plan for this event by implementing pre-emergency training that better emphasizes proper protection and the ethical behavior of medical personnel.

DESCRIPTION

During the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) outbreak, Canadian officials noted widespread complaints from medical personnel about psychological pressure, frustration with wearing constricting protective gear, and fear of exposing themselves and their families to the disease. At least five local nurses in Toronto quit their jobs due to concerns about contracting the disease. Canadian health officials acknowledged that the increasing pattern of resignations would have jeopardized the nation's response capability if the epidemic had been more severe.

In a report to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the University of Louisville School of Medicine recommends that state and federal planners identify strategies for retaining health care workers during an infectious disease outbreak. The report offers three suggestions. First, hospitals should offer improved training on the use of prophylaxes during a contagious disease outbreak. Second, hospitals should offer medical personnel in direct contact with infected patients hazard pay as well as days to recuperate following the suppression of the outbreak. Third, medical and nursing schools should include ethics courses that focus on the responsibilities of medical practitioners.

By educating health workers about safety precautions and ethical responsibilities during disease epidemics, medical personnel may be less likely to refuse to treat patients infected with a contagious disease.

CITATION

- University of Louisville School of Medicine. "Quarantine and Isolation: Lessons Learned from SARS: A Report to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention." May 2004.
([LLIS.gov ID# 9189](#))
(<http://www.louisville.edu/medschool/ibhpl/publications/SARS%20REPORT.pdf>)
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. "Some Toronto Nurses Quit Over SARS." 26 April 2003.

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