

#### RELATED TERMS

- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome
- Infection Control



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## LESSON LEARNED

### Infectious Disease Outbreaks: Establishing Separate Triage and Assessment Facilities

#### SUMMARY

During an infectious disease outbreak, public health and medical professionals may guard against disease transmission in medical settings by setting up separate triage and assessment centers.

#### DESCRIPTION

During the 2003 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) virus outbreak in Taiwan and Toronto, Canada, public health and medical professionals quickly recognized that the virus spread predominantly in hospital environments. Many medical staff members had trouble distinguishing SARS from more traditional respiratory viruses and were thus slow to isolate infected patients. Consequently, unrecognized SARS cases in hospitals and emergency departments were the source of many instances of SARS transmission.

Hospital staff members in Taiwan and Toronto soon realized they needed to evaluate patients with fever or other SARS symptoms at a sufficient distance from non-SARS patients. Hospital personnel worked closely with public health officials and engineers to set up well-equipped triage and assessment centers outside of hospitals' emergency departments. Such facilities minimized the risk of transmission while also augmenting the number of SARS patients that the hospitals could treat.

Medical personnel adopted different approaches to creating these facilities. Taiwanese officials built many temporary structures with high-efficiency filtration systems. In one example, they converted vacant military barracks into a SARS screening and isolation facility with individual patient rooms. Toronto hospital officials set up large tents to accept patients and converted some existing facilities into SARS-specific clinics. Within all of these facilities, staff exercised additional precautionary measures to further guard against transmission. They placed patients at least one meter apart from each other, marked clear entrance and exit pathways, and installed adequate ventilation systems. Taiwan's and Toronto's SARS evaluation centers successfully prevented the transmission of SARS; in fact, no cases of transmission were reported in these hospitals.

When confronting an infectious disease outbreak, hospital staff and public health officials may wish to triage and assess symptomatic patients in non-hospital settings as a precaution against hospital transmission. Hospital staff may wish to consider evaluating these patients in newly-created or converted facilities that are adjacent to or otherwise separate from the hospital itself.

**CITATION**

Esswein, Eric J., Max Kiefer, Ken Wallingford, et al. "Environmental and Occupational Health Response to SARS, Taiwan, 2003," *Emerging Infectious Diseases*. Vol. 10, no. 7, Jul 2004, pp. 1187-1194.

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