

# **Major Shortcomings in Hospital Readiness for Radiological Terrorism**

by Barbara Kram, Editor  
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CHICAGO - The findings of a new study published in the American Medical Association's (AMA) Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness journal found that emergency department physicians and nurses are deeply concerned about the ability of the nation's hospitals to deal with the medical implications of a radioactive dirty bomb or other terrorist attacks involving radioactive materials.

"Hospital emergency departments will play a crucial role in the response to any terrorist attack involving radioactive materials," said study lead author Steven M. Becker, PhD, Associate Professor of Public Health, and Vice Chair of the Department of Environmental Health Sciences, at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. "In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the actions of hospitals will be central to the success or failure of efforts to manage a radiological terrorism attack and its health consequences."

Researchers conducted a series of 10 focus groups with emergency department physicians and nurses in hospitals in three U.S. regions - southeast, northeast and the west. Study participants discussed a hypothetical "dirty bomb" scenario and the treatment of patients affected by such an attack. Participants consistently expressed the view that medical professionals, emergency departments, and hospital facilities are not sufficiently prepared to respond effectively to a radiological attack. Key concerns of physicians and nurses include the possibility of the hospital being overwhelmed with patients, safety of loved ones, potential staff shortages, risks for hospital personnel, and a general lack of familiarity with radiation safety and treatment issues.

The study, which was funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), provides new insights into physician and nurse concerns and viewpoints, and reveals major preparedness challenges.

These challenges must be addressed if hospitals and the nation are to successfully face current and future threats.

"The study has clear implications for medical preparedness and response," said Dr. Becker. "There is a need for increased information and training on managing radiological events, protecting staff, and treating affected patients. Likewise, there is a need for increased access to informational resources, such as specialized professional hotlines, pocket guides, posters and toolkits. In addition, physicians' and nurses' concerns for loved ones need to be better taken into account in preparedness planning to prevent a potential shortage of health care providers."

Additional articles in the October issue of the AMA Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness journal include:

- "Participatory Action Research Methodology in Disaster Research: Results from the World Trade Center Evacuation Study"

- "Seeking Help for Disaster Services After a Flood" (published ahead of print on July 2, 2008)

- "Recommendations for Post exposure Interventions to Prevent Infection with Hepatitis B Virus, Hepatitis C Virus, or Human Immunodeficiency Virus, and Tetanus in Persons Wounded During Bombings and Other Mass-Casualty Events" (co-published with the CDC ahead of AMA disaster journal print on Aug. 1, 2008)

- "Emergency Medical Consequence Planning and Management for National Special Security Events after 9-11: Boston, 2004" (published ahead of print on Aug. 20, 2008)

#### About AMA's Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness Journal

The AMA Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness journal was created to promote public health preparedness and the science of disaster medicine. It is the first comprehensive, peer-reviewed publication emphasizing public health preparedness and disaster response. The journal is published for the AMA by leading health care publisher Lippincott Williams & Wilkins. An online version can be found at: <http://www.dmphp.org/>