

SOUTHWESTERN NEWS

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UT SOUTHWESTERN PHYSICIAN LEADS NEW EMERGENCY TEAM

DALLAS - Oct. 18, 1996 - The world's most devastating disasters usually are fathomless and far away: tens of thousands of people killed or injured by a cyclone in Bangladesh, an earthquake in Iran or a gas leak in India. But the United States is not immune to such disasters, or smaller ones, that could overwhelm the medical-care capabilities of any city.

Dr. Stewart Coffman of UT Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas is organizing volunteers from the Dallas-Fort Worth area to be a key element of the U.S. government's plan to deal with natural and man-made catastrophes that result in massive casualties.

Under Coffman's leadership, UT Southwestern physicians Brian Zachariah, assistant professor of emergency medicine, and Lysa Campbell, instructor of emergency medicine, and a dozen nurses, more than 30 paramedics and emergency medicine technicians, two hazardous materials experts, and a pharmacist have begun Disaster Medical Assistance Team, or DMAT, training.

"The Metroplex Division DMAT will learn how to triage and stabilize patients at a disaster site," said Coffman, an assistant professor in UT Southwestern's Division of Emergency Medicine. "By March, the team will be ready to respond in just a few hours to any emergency, including those caused by hazardous materials or chemical weapons. So far, though, the national teams have been needed only for natural disasters."

The teams are part of the National Disaster Medical System, which is designed to care for as many as 110,000 victims of an earthquake, industrial accident, war or other

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incident that overwhelms the medical-care systems of the affected state or region. There are more than 70 teams nationwide. In Texas, the TX-1 DMAT is made up of four divisions.

Coffman was a member of the DMAT from San Diego, where he lived before coming to UT Southwestern last year. He keeps a backpack loaded with a sleeping bag, canteen, flashlight, medical gear and clothes, and enough military ready-to-eat meals to last for three days.

"You need to be able to board a jet or helicopter quickly," Coffman said, "and you need to be able to survive for 72 hours without becoming a burden yourself to the already overwhelmed local resources."

The San Diego DMAT, including Coffman, relieved hospital staff during the Northridge, Calif., earthquake in 1994. The TX-1 DMAT has been deployed to the Northridge earthquake and Hurricane Opal.

This summer, for the first time, DMATs were activated before a disaster occurred, taking turns at the Olympic games in Atlanta and the Republican and Democratic party conventions.

"The bombing at the Olympics didn't require a DMAT response," Coffman said. "But DMATs now will be used at national events that are potential terrorists' targets."

The DMAT volunteers must have employers who will allow them to leave work with little advance notice. However, once they are activated, the team members become federal employees.

"DMAT volunteers are an asset to their employers because they gain experience and training," Coffman said. "Most importantly, they are an asset to the disaster area and its victims."

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