

Community pharmacies ready to help

By **Jessika Boedeker**

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Barrow County will never experience the deadly combination of earthquake, tsunami, and nuclear accident that recently hit Japan.

But Northeast Georgia is not immune to tornados, ice storms, toxic spills from rail cars, or fast-moving outbreaks of flu.

Georgia is also home to two aging nuclear power plants, with Plant Vogtle in Waynesboro and Plant Hatch in Baxley. Plant Vogtle, about 150 miles from Barrow County, is set to gain two new reactors that will be the first constructed in the United States in nearly 30 years.

In an emergency of any kind, national and local experts say that corner drug stores will be key players in the response.

"Pharmacies are in a unique position where they can reach mass numbers of people, since 93 percent of Americans live within five miles of a community pharmacy," according to Mitchel Rothhelz of the American Pharmacists Association. He spoke to a national gathering of emergency planners last month in Atlanta.

About 96 percent of U.S. pharmacies use computerized databases that can be beneficial in any emergency, enabling pharmacists to help people whose personal records or homes have been lost.

Most pharmacists are also trained to administer immunizations to protect against flu, shingles, pneumonia and other diseases.

"Pharmacists are so accessible, rarely requiring an appointment for advice and immunizations," said Rebecca Welch, Rite Aid Pharmacist in Winder.

This accessibility will be essential if there is an outbreak of pandemic flu.

"The flu vaccine is a top priority, because it affects so many people and it needs to be given on a yearly basis," said Welch.

Dispensing medication is, of course, central to the work of the pharmacist. During flu outbreaks pharmacists would be called on to dispense Tamiflu and similar antiviral medications, and advise customers about containing the epidemic. Besides using their own medical knowledge, pharmacists also maintain sophisticated databases that could play a pivotal role in community health in a crisis.

Databases that pharmacists routinely use to

fill prescriptions, double as surveillance tools during a flu outbreak, contamination of the local food or water supply, or a bioterrorism attack. Following 9/11, New York City's health department and those in other major cities began funneling pharmacy sales data into its systems for detecting unusual patterns of illness.

"We are using the computer systems to survey over-the-counter sales, so if we see a spike in Pepto-Bismol then that may suggest more gastrointestinal disease in the community," said Rachel Abbey, program director for the Advanced Practice Center from the Montgomery County Maryland Department of Health in Maryland.

When homes and neighborhoods are wiped out and people evacuate without their medicine, which happened after Hurricane Katrina, pharmacy databases assume even more importance.

"There are big challenges when it comes to national disasters or emergencies. People come into clinics with no medical or prescription records, and the healthcare professional is trying to figure out what they need to control their everyday problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes," said Greene Shepherd, Pharm.D., clinical professor of pharmacy at the University of Georgia.

Hurricane Katrina motivated pharmacy and physician groups, along with corporate sponsors, to set up ICERX, or In Case of Emergency Rx. Doctors, public health agencies, pharmacists, or patients can upload medications information to this centralized database — which will be accessible even if people are displaced from their homes.

"If a patient is seeing someone other than their normal provider than they can access their records in a central place," said Mitchel Rothhelz, chief of staff for the American Pharmacist Association.

His organization represents over 220,000 pharmacists.

As the digital integration of pharmacy systems advances, pharmacists will play an even more vital role in emergency preparedness.

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