How to prepare—

Learning to practice like we play

BY KELLY JOLLIFF, BA, CIC, CHEC

This past September marked 15 years since the tragic terrorist attacks on 9/11—a day all of us remember vividly. It’s a day that changed our preparedness infrastructure forever. Threats to our communities and healthcare systems are constantly evolving, whether they are natural, technological, or human. National Preparedness Month was established in September 2004 to encourage Americans to take steps to prepare for emergencies in their homes, businesses, schools, and communities. Working in healthcare, we must ask ourselves how we can be better prepared for infection prevention emergencies or disasters.

Many infection preventionists (IPs) are likely already involved in their facility emergency preparedness efforts (or may even be responsible for them on top of their other duties). Many facilities have all-hazard plans, complete annual hazard vulnerability risk assessments that identify top risks, and perform periodic drills based upon these threats. Where many of us fall short is in our ability to engage staff at all levels to ensure they are well trained and familiar with their response roles. If our staff members have never actually practiced their response, how do we expect them to know what to do in a crisis situation? How can we practice like we play and make our training and exercises more meaningful?

DO IT: IT’S MORE THAN A SLOGAN

Adult learning is typically problem-centered in response to current situations. We also know that retention increases when immediate application follows instruction. Taking this into account, my facility, Memorial Hospital of South Bend (a 463-bed facility and level II trauma center that is part of the Beacon Health System in South Bend, Indiana) developed a regular training and exercise program that focuses on immediate response action to specific scenarios. The program is called Department Operational Instructional Training (DO IT). Scenarios are developed bimonthly with a training guide to facilitate simulating a response. Scenarios are sent to managers, directors, and educators to present to staff on all shifts. Departments describe the scenario, discuss response actions, and ask staff to demonstrate any actions (e.g., locate emergency power outlet, safe area, evacuation route, don personal protective equipment). The goal is to enhance preparedness by practicing immediate response actions to emergencies on a regular basis.

Emergency preparedness scenarios can include any type of event, emergency, or special topic on which staff need training. The key is to focus on immediate response actions. See the following sample scenarios for use in your facilities.

MISSING INFANT
A new mother went to use the restroom, leaving her newborn in the basinet alone in the hospital room. When she returned, she found the infant missing. She runs out of the room screaming that her baby is gone. What do you do?

ACTIVE SHOOTER
You are working on your unit or department when you hear what sounds like gunfire down the hallway. What do you do?

INTERNAL FLOOD
A water pipe bursts and you see water pouring from the ceiling and a significant accumulation of water forming in your immediate area. What do you do?

INFECTIOUS DISEASE
A patient is admitted to your unit or floor with concern for tuberculosis. What do you do? (Questions should include what type of room the patient needs, what type of PPE is necessary, donning and doffing procedures, and guidance for testing, allowing visitors, etc.)
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Conducting regular drills can easily be done within 10 minutes. A department-driven approach allows for more flexibility to address specific capabilities and considerations. Real-time, peer-to-peer coaching and discussion can foster an enhanced level of alertness and team building. Here are five simple tips for how to run a drill:

1. **Utilize** a realistic scenario—and keep it simple!
2. **Present** the scenario to on-duty staff. Ask them what they should do (focus on the first 10 minutes of a response).
3. **Ask** staff to demonstrate any actions (e.g., locate emergency power outlet(s), safe area, evacuation route, don PPE, etc.) and reinforce appropriate responses/actions.
4. **Educate** as necessary. Revisit any issues identified and drill again.
5. **Document** performance and areas for improvement.

As flu season gears up, consider how you can use this as an opportunity to practice your response to an infectious disease event. How would you dispense medication or vaccines to your entire staff? How many staff can you get through in an hour, and what forms do you need them to fill out? If providing for family members, how will you do this? How do you verify that staff members are not coming to work sick? Review your infectious disease response and surge plans and use this as an opportunity to educate other departments on these plans and their roles. Develop a scenario to pose to each department to get them thinking about what they would do if this event occurred. Think of how things might look if a bioterrorism event or influenza pandemic were to occur, and paint this picture for the organization. Look at the throughput of your flu clinics and consider what it would look like if they were potentially infectious.

This is also a good time to promote personal preparedness throughout your organization. If our homes and families are not taken care of, we are not going to be helpful to our organizations and communities. Use real events like flu clinics or orientations as opportunities to educate staff about the importance of personal preparedness. Share preparedness checklists for home and work. Consider working with a team to develop fun events with giveaways. Post information in organization newsletters, websites, and on social media. A variety of information, tools, and ideas are available on the National Preparedness Month website: [https://www.ready.gov/september](https://www.ready.gov/september).

"Remember that the only thing harder than being prepared is explaining why you were not."
Ensuring our healthcare system and staff are prepared to deal with an emergency in today’s world is not only a requirement, it is a necessity. Preparing for emergencies can seem like a daunting task, but it does not have to be if we take small steps frequently and promote simple and meaningful opportunities to practice our response. Let us all make a commitment to try to practice like we would play (DO IT) at work or at home. Remember that the only thing harder than being prepared is explaining why you were not.

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