

EMERGENCY PREPAREDNESS:
A RESPONSIBILITY OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION

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On behalf of the American Medical Association, let me extend to you a very sincere thank you for having participated in this conference. This conference got started as a result of concerns about what happened in Chernobyl and at Three Mile Island and other places in the United States; it was also our concern, however, that both man-made and natural disasters should be looked at again in this country from the standpoint of the medical profession. Not very long ago I think all of us understood that. We were ready for emergencies, and we could hear the thunder clouds when they came. More recently we appear to have set that concern aside and our participation in preparedness planning has been much less intense.

In the early 1950s when I first started practice in Texas, we had twin natural disasters in my first year there. These disasters are interesting case studies of emergency preparedness. On the same day twin tornadoes came roaring through Texas, as they frequently do. One on the east side of Texas hit Waco, while the other on the west side hit San Angelo. Each community's response was different and distinct.

Waco had very little predisaster planning, even though the storm and tornado warnings had been broadcast a full 24 hours earlier. People paid little attention to them, because the prevailing feeling was that the city was invulnerable. One of the reasons they were invulnerable, they thought, was an old Indian legend that the Chamber of Commerce in Waco cranked out periodically. The legend said that the city could not be damaged by tornados. When the twister finally was sighted, there was only one attempt to warn the people in town. That came from a local police officer who lived a few miles outside the city. He saw the cloud and called the County Sheriff's office. Before he could give any details, the telephone connection was broken, and the communication system was destroyed.

Without any warning the tornado came roaring through town, bulldozing and smashing buildings. When it was all over, 114 people had died and more than 1,000 were injured, 145 very seriously. The Army Corps of Engineers said that most of those casualties would not have occurred if the people had simply taken heed and moved out. They would have had enough time to do so. But the problem in Waco was they did not have any

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