

Physicians' Responsibilities in Disaster Response & Preparedness

Code of Medical Ethics Opinion 8.3

Whether at the national, regional, or local level, responses to disasters require extensive involvement from physicians individually and collectively. Because of their commitment to care for the sick and injured, individual physicians have an obligation to provide urgent medical care during disasters. This obligation holds even in the face of greater than usual risks to physicians' own safety, health, or life.

However, the physician workforce is not an unlimited resource. Therefore, when providing care in a disaster with its inherent dangers, physicians also have an obligation to evaluate the risks of providing care to individual patients versus the need to be available to provide care in the future.

With respect to disaster, whether natural or manmade, individual physicians should:

(a) Take appropriate advance measures, including acquiring and maintaining appropriate knowledge and skills to ensure they are able to provide medical services when needed.

Collectively, physicians should:

(b) Provide medical expertise and work with others to develop public health policies that:

1. Are designed to improve the effectiveness and availability of medical services during a disaster
2. Are based on sound science
3. Are based on respect for patients

(c) Advocate for and participate in ethically sound research to inform policy decisions.

AMA Principles of Medical Ethics: V, VI, VII, VIII

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