

The Disaster Reserve Partner Group at NYCOM

Anuj Vohra, MSIII
Zinovy Meyler, MSIII

The rigors of undergraduate osteopathic medical education had already changed the lives of those of us starting at New York College of Osteopathic Medicine (NYCOM) of New York Institute of Technology in 2001. Our immediate objectives were straightforward: attend classes by day, study hard at night, and become our best. Our lives were untouched by outside realities as we became absorbed in textbooks, cadavers, and microscopes. The worst scenario any of us could imagine was failing an examination.

The events that occurred on September 11, 2001, changed all that, putting into perspective much more than we could have imagined. The terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York moved us as nothing had before. Particularly as medical students, we knew we needed to do something, but our experience was limited. We had been in medical school less than 1 month with little significant ability or training. It was the worst feeling of helplessness imaginable. Even those of us with emergency medical training felt unprepared and uncertain of how to proceed, how to help.

Some of us realized from that event that precisely because we are medical students, we should take it on ourselves to acquire the necessary training to become prepared for any type of calamity that might occur. Thus, with our lives now consumed by the threat of warfare and bioterrorism, the Disaster Reserve Partner Group (DRPG) of NYCOM was born. We understood the need to stand together, not only as leaders of our generation, but also as pioneers for the future of health care and medicine.

The mission of the DRPG is to take an active role in disaster relief and to assist the American Red Cross in providing relief services. The primary activity of this modest but important initiative is to serve as a staffing resource for shelter operations, important during a large-scale disaster.

Training within the DRPG program takes place over 2 days and begins with an orientation in which students learn

about the origins of the American Red Cross and its impact on history, including the organization's role in the development of the Geneva Conventions of August 12, 1949, relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts. Participants then attend the first of four courses required by the American Red Cross Emergency Services. The first course, Introduction to Disaster, involves discussion of the basics of emergency training, including types of disasters and possible responses and the variety of populations affected. The next course, Mass Care, covers the logistics of caring for a large population and the differences and implications of caring for a group of 50, as opposed to a group of 500 or more.

The second day of training is usually presented 1 week later. It begins with the Shelter Operations course, which includes instruction in the procedures and logistics of setting up and maintaining a shelter. Students learn about the roles they can serve in the shelter, as well as the responsibilities and expectations for each. In the Shelter Simulation course, training continues with simulation of a disaster situation that requires a mock shelter to be constructed. Instructors then challenge the group with problems that may be encountered in an actual scenario. Students are expected to respond based on reasonable logic and training while working as a coherent team. This course completes the training, a total of 16 hours over 4 courses.

Students receive four separate certifications from the American Red Cross (one for each course completed) and become affiliated with Emergency Services of the American Red Cross in Greater New York. An advantage of the certifications is that they can be used anywhere in the United States, as it is understood that many students may not undergo their residency or establish their practice where they complete their DRPG training. Another advantage of this program is that the American Red Cross in Greater New York provides all the necessary training and materials free of charge.

The DRPG offers a multitude of benefits to medical students besides disaster training, including exposure to the needs of the community in such a setting. Students develop effective leadership skills and gain practical field experience by actively participating in local large-scale disaster operations. The DRPG adds to one's medical school education and pro-

Anuj Vohra and Zinovy Meyler are third-year medical students at the New York College of Osteopathic Medicine of New York Institute of Technology, Old Westbury, New York. Mr. Vohra and Mr. Meyler brought the Disaster Reserve Partner Group, which was already established in other areas of New York, to NYCOM where both serve as Executive Directors.

Address correspondence to Anuj Vohra, 600 Hook St., Valley Stream, NY 11581-3504.

E-mail: avohra@nyit.edu

SPECIAL COMMUNICATION

vides students with an understanding and appreciation of resources that can be used inside and outside the hospital setting.

The New York College of Osteopathic Medicine is the first medical school in the greater New York area to be involved in the DRPG program. This strengthens NYCOM's and the osteopathic medical profession's commitment to training physicians who are dedicated to community service and to serving as providers of quality health care. The community benefits from having a DRPG at NYCOM by having available to it a group of dedicated medical students who are trained and ready to assist in case of calamity.

The DRPG at NYCOM had a great start and has become one of the largest initiatives at NYCOM in only 8 months. Our group is one of the largest affiliated with the American Red Cross in Greater New York, and we are in the process of expanding the training offered, with hopes of increasing our membership. We are working with other organizations to add courses to our curriculum, such as Basic Disaster Life Support, Advanced Disaster Life Support, and Basic Trauma Life Support. These are all-hazard training courses that include such topics as patient decontamination, a situation we hope will never occur, but one we must be prepared to meet.

As medical students, we cannot take part in the Advanced Trauma Life Support training; however, we can take the Trauma Evaluation and Management course, which is a part of Advanced Trauma Life Support training and is available at the undergraduate level. We are also continuing our partnership with the American Red Cross and are working on incorporating a Preparing for the Unexpected course, which trains medical students to educate their communities about preparedness for events ranging from earthquakes to terrorist attacks. Instruction includes information on planning routes of escape, gathering essentials, and creating a family disaster plan.

The DRPG program provides medical students the ability to help those in distress as well, providing skills that will prove to be beneficial throughout their careers. As future physicians, it is our role to serve as leaders in all aspects of modern medicine. This program gives students the opportunity to initiate advancement in their own training and to prepare for the problems of tomorrow today. We should take it on ourselves not only to restore health, but to educate ourselves and our community in all aspects of health care. One of our hopes with DRPG is to begin a string of student-initiated projects that will strengthen our ability to heal. While we appreciate all the education NYCOM is providing us, nothing compares to self-empowerment.