

Pharmacists Provide Disaster Relief

Drake Puts Pharmacy Skills to Good Use with Disaster Relief Efforts

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Bill Drake (second from right) is shown here with other pharmacist relief workers, (from left) Kevin Mark, California 11 DMAT; Lt. Cmdr Christine Yu of U.S. Public Health Service (USPHS), FDA Division; Lt. Karen Williams (seated), USPHS HRSA—Office of Pharmacy Affairs; and Capt. Lisa Tonrey, USPHS, Indian Health Services.

In the past several years, Bill Drake has traveled to Florida, Alabama, Atlanta, New Orleans, Virginia, Mississippi and Houston, but not for vacations. Instead, he selflessly donated his time to provide disaster relief to those in devastated situations. The president of Advanced Care, Inc., and president and CEO of Option Care of Southeastern Michigan Home Infusion and Nutritional Services in Shelby Township, Drake is perpetually ready to leave his family and business on extremely short notice in order to help those in need. Drake joined the Michigan 1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT) as a team pharmacist in 2002. Previously a firefighter and a paramedic, Drake wished to continue his public service, but wanted to better utilize his education, training and experience with pharma-

cy. A friend, Colonel John Grabenstein, recommended the DMAT team. During his service, Drake has participated in relief efforts following Hurricanes Isabel, Charley, Frances, Ivan, Dennis and most, recently, Katrina and Rita.

DMAT members become contingent federal employees, go through extensive training and serve as first responders for the federal government for many situations. These situations include not only natural disasters, mass casualty events and terrorism attacks, but also high-profile events such as the Olympics, Super Bowl and presidential inaugurations. The Michigan 1 DMAT is one of 40 teams throughout the country. It is a level one team, which is the highest level, and members can be called to service with as little as eight



hours notice. The team consists of medical professionals, such as pharmacists, physicians, physician's assistants, nurse practitioners, nurses, paramedics and mental health professionals, along with communications, logistics and administrative support personnel.

During the month of August 2005, when teams were preparing for Hurricane Katrina, the Michigan 1 DMAT wasn't on the call roster. Instead of sitting back while others took care of relief efforts, Drake was picked up as a command team member for the Katrina Mission Support Team. He served as the chief pharmacist and pharmacy unit leader for the effort. As chief pharmacist, Drake's role consisted of connecting initial response teams with their cache, managing getting supplies to the teams in the field as they ran out, making sure all the teams' needs were met and consulting with and advising the



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Cover story



team's commander regarding pharmacy-related issues.

Drake was pre-deployed to Houston prior to landfall of Hurricane Katrina. Immediately after landfall, Drake, as a member of the command group, traveled to Baton Rouge. Initially, Drake was stationed in Baton Rouge on the campus of Louisiana State University. The campus had become a major evacuee station, so patients were all around them. The Pete Marovich Center was a large intensive care unit with multiple disciplines of medicine set up throughout the area. These included a respiratory care area, dialysis, cardiac care and many other specialized areas. The running track became a medi-vac landing stretch for helicopters arriving from New Orleans.

The Mission Support Team's main focus was sending field teams into New Orleans. When the team first arrived, personnel stayed in dorm rooms. Plumbing and electricity were not functioning in the makeshift accommodations, but this wasn't much of an issue considering the amount of time team members spent actually resting. They rarely had time to return to their quarters. During initial preparation, days started at 5:30 a.m. with a staff meeting. Things were hectic as teams were sent 90 miles to New Orleans into the disaster areas. Additionally, teams from all over the country were arriving around the clock. Drugs and other supplies were also arriving at all times of the night and day. It was difficult to find time to rest. Drake slept when and where he could, under a truck, in the back of a van, even in the women's basketball locker room. He averaged three or four hours of sleep a night and generally ate only one meal a day. His longest day lasted 38 hours.

After initial setup, Drake worked 15- to 18-hour days. A typical day consisted of working in the command office in the morning, dealing with administrative issues. During the afternoon, he would travel into the disaster areas to provide support, assistance and guidance to the field teams. Although he saw great tragedy, Drake confessed that there wasn't much time to feel sad. "You're trained to do the job, but you're still human," he said. "When you realize your family back home is safe, it really hits you. These people have literally lost everything other than the clothes on their backs. That's a moving moment." He told one story of an elderly couple who were together in a shelter. The husband sat in his wheelchair next to his wife as she quietly passed away. Drake had experiences like this frequently during his deployment.

According to Drake, most of the damage to the city of New Orleans didn't come from the actual hurricane, but rather from the ensuing levee breaks. He spoke of the situation as an almost unreal experience. Used to the bustle of the Detroit area where he lives and works, Drake found the calm and quiet of the abandoned areas and deserted highways eerie. However, the enormity of the event for Drake was seeing the human component. The victims who were helped by the disaster relief personnel were enormously grateful. "When they found out where we came from and that we were, for all practical purposes, volunteers, many of them would choke up, with watery eyes or even just start crying," Drake said.

Drake's initial deployment for Katrina was from August 27 through September 19. When he first arrived, he didn't know when he would be able to return home. The team was told initially that they might have to stay for several months. Drake confessed that that was one of the hardest parts of the job—missing his family and not knowing when he would see them again. Fortunately, he was able to return home for a brief break before redeploying on September 26. A few days after his return, his command center was relocated to downtown New Orleans in the Marriott Hotel near Bourbon Street. Their group was one of the first to re-enter the city. On October 12, he returned home until next hurricane season.

Hurricane season is almost upon us again, and Drake says his bag is already packed and ready for another possible deployment. He jokes that he hasn't been home for Labor Day weekend in four years. Even so, he plans to continue his relief work for the foreseeable future. To Drake, it's worth the sacrifice to use the skills of his profession to help those in need.