



April 7, 2009

An open letter from CNA President Kaaren Neufeld, RN, MN

Dear colleagues,

Today is World Health Day. This year, World Health Day focuses on readying our health facilities to safely care for those affected by emergencies. World Health Day 2009 focuses on the resilience and safety of health facilities and the health workers who treat those affected by emergencies. Nurses are a key part of these preparations, through their roles in clinical practice, education, research, administration and policy.

Canada is one of many countries around the world that are striving to improve the safety of hospitals and other care facilities. The importance of building a strong health-care infrastructure – one that can adequately handle a sudden increase in caseload brought on by emergency situations such as the 2003 SARS crisis, the contamination of the Walkerton water supply in 2000 or an environmental disaster such as a tsunami – cannot be understated. Nurses play a crucial role in these preparedness efforts because they have the knowledge and skills to be part of planning for and responding to emergencies. In a crisis, they will be able to deliver health-care services, information, education and community-building activities.

As has been illustrated by past emergencies, our success in handling sudden health-care crises depends on advance preparation, heightened awareness of potential emergencies and adequate communication and information systems. To be ready to respond, nurses everywhere need to:

- be involved in developing the emergency plan where they work to ensure that it effectively addresses patient safety priorities;
- have a full understanding of their role in the emergency plan and how the plan fits in with the emergency preparedness of the surrounding community;
- be aware of the latest national emergency plans, as well as any emerging, urgent health-care issues around the globe that could have an international impact; and
- participate in the setting of institutional and community policies and keep these policies current.

Widespread health emergencies, caused by any of a number of biological, chemical, physical or environmental agents, may occur at any time. It is therefore important for nurses to stay on top of emergency preparedness efforts and to keep themselves healthy, so that they can care for affected Canadians during a crisis. It is also important that Canadian nurses continue to advocate for the involvement of vulnerable groups and other stakeholders in emergency planning and for the consideration of factors that may contribute to emergencies, such as climate change, violence and poverty.

As nurses, it is both our privilege and our responsibility to play a central role in keeping Canadians safe and our health-care system effective when disaster strikes.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Kaaren Neufeld'.

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