

## *New Jersey Hospitals Shine on the Darkest of Days*

BY KERRY McKEAN KELLY

**O**n Sept. 11, New Jersey hospitals launched an unprecedented emergency response to an unimaginable disaster. Here are some of their stories:

**SEPT. 11, 8:48 A.M.** Dr. John Brennan had just seen his 4-year-old daughter off to her first day of nursery school. He was in his driveway, about to leave for his job as vice president of emergency services for the Saint Barnabas Health Care System, when the car radio aired a special report: A plane had struck the north tower of the World Trade Center. Brennan went back into the house, turned on the TV and watched the disaster unfold. With the magnitude of the devastation increasing, Brennan went to the phone and “called in every physician,” he said.

Arriving a short time later at Saint Barnabas Medical Center in Livingston, Brennan helped set up a central command post to mobilize medical staff, supplies and medications throughout the system. The hospital also deployed five teams of paramedics to transport the victims.

In a straight line about 20 miles east of Saint Barnabas, Dr. Virginia Witt was just finishing morning report with the residents at Christ Hospital in Jersey City. Witt, on staff with the department of family practice at Christ’s nearby sister hospital, St. Francis Hospital, and a faculty member at the UMDNJ School of Osteopathic Medicine, had lingered in the conference room with some colleagues when a resident returned saying that a plane had struck the World Trade Center. The group hurried to the hospital’s cafeteria, where a window offered a clear view across the Hudson River to lower Manhattan. “We were there with our mouths hanging open, looking out the window when the second plane hit,” she said.

Dr. Witt rushed back to St. Francis, where a “Code D” — for disaster — was sounding from the hospital PA system. She called in residents, “then



*Jersey City Medical Center: A river away from ground zero.*

threw on some scrubs and went down to the ER.”

**10:15 A.M.** No New Jersey hospital stood closer to the disaster than Jersey City Medical Center. There, medical staff had a head start on emergency preparations because a hospital vice president witnessed the first plane strike out his office window.

Ellen Brummer, RN, head nurse manager for the surgical and intensive care units, and Karen Cepero, RN, director of patient care services for the Emergency Department/critical care, had already helped stage the ER and set up a triage area in the parking lot when the first casualties began arriving. “One of the first ones we got in

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was a fireman who was badly burned," Brummer said. They treated other firefighters and a New York physician who suffered serious injuries from flying debris. Another firefighter had been trapped for a time in the rubble. He had inhaled so much pulverized concrete and glass that he ended up on a ventilator in intensive care.

Meanwhile, other hospital staffers responded to the call for assistance at a hastily assembled triage site at Liberty State Park about a mile away. Jim McCreath, vice president of behavioral health, sent mental health professionals to the site to provide case management and social services. Dozens of victims were transported back to the hospital, including the "refugees" who were not physically injured but had been ordered to evacuate the area and turned to the ferries as the fastest escape route.

**NOON.** As the extent of the tragedy unfolded, hospitals statewide offered their assistance. More than 100 miles south of the disaster, Shore Memorial Hospital in Somers Point had canceled all elective surgeries — as had hospitals across the state — and was on alert to



A JCMC nurse tends to one of the first casualties.

prepare for casualties. The desire to help was great: By noon, about 75 physicians and nurses had volunteered their services, and buses were on standby at a nearby transportation company to take them to the victims.

Meanwhile, Martin Hogan, director of the mobile intensive care unit at Hunterdon Medical Center in the westernmost part of the state, was speeding toward Liberty State Park with two MICUs and 10 paramedics. They were just one component of a massive statewide response by basic life support units and hospital-based advanced life support units.

Back in Jersey City, Dr. Witt and her team at St. Francis were caring for about 40 casualties in the ER. "They were completely shell-shocked," she said. "You often see a lot of hysteria with emergency patients, but ... there was silence from these people."

Dr. Witt recalls one particular patient that afternoon, a firefighter who had suf-



Medical staffers stand ready to assist the injured.

fered a "huge gash" and several other injuries. He was covered in the chalky debris that hovered over the area. "He looked like he had been in World War III and he just wanted to get back to the site," said Dr. Witt.

Dr. Brennan at Saint Barnabas was

## Perspective

GARY S. CARTER, FACHE – President



**I**t's been just a few weeks since terrorists attacked our country, and for most of us the true extent of those terrible crimes has just begun to settle in. Yes, we've tried to return to a normal routine, but "normalcy" now carries an undercurrent of loss and unease.

But the grief that blankets our nation is mixed with other feelings, welcome feelings of resolve and mutual support. One response that we can look to for reassurance and embrace with great pride is the unprecedented emergency effort of New Jersey's healthcare community. Never before have our hospitals been asked to answer such an important call to service. More than 5,000 victims and refugees streamed into our state, and they were cared for by an incredibly well prepared and committed network of physicians, nurses, paramedics, social workers and other healthcare

professionals.

All told, 60 New Jersey hospitals treated patients from the World Trade Center calamity, and even those facilities that received no casualties played a vitally important support role with offers of volunteers, supplies, blood and medications.

Our industry performed heroically on Sept. 11, and I sincerely want to thank each of you. I know sadness and frustration remains, especially because our hospitals were prepared for so many more survivors — survivors that never came. But we can funnel those feelings into continued service in the months ahead as we tend to the emotional needs of the victims, their families, our staff members and all of our fellow New Jerseyans. Together, we'll start the healing process as we — and the country — move forward.

also busy in the afternoon hours. There were lots of eye injuries and breathing problems from debris, he said, plus five burn victims sent to the hospital's renowned burn center.

**4 P.M.** About seven hours into hospitals' emergency efforts, a state trooper pulled up to St. Francis "making a plea for any available doctor that could go to Liberty State Park," said Dr. Witt. She volunteered, along with another physician and a nurse practitioner. They rushed to the scene, assembled their triage beds — and waited for patients. But none came. "That was really the tragedy — we were available with willing hands and the expertise, but unfortunately there were not many wounded," she said.

**WEEK ONE.** McCreath, of Jersey City Medical Center's behavioral health team, spent Tuesday night at the hospital. "At about 1 in the morning, the phone calls started coming in from family members," he said. The next day, the walk-ins came — desperate individuals searching for missing loved ones. "People were streaming in and we stationed counselors in those rooms," McCreath said.

The hospital acted quickly to set up a phone bank to help those who were searching, and NJHA assisted by supplying statewide hospital information to form a comprehensive list of victims treated in New Jersey hospitals. Between

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*The triage area was rife with activity.*

## *NJHA's Info Conduit Kept Hospitals Linked During Crisis*

By RON CZAJKOWSKI

**W**ithin half an hour of learning of the attack on the World Trade Center, key NJHA staff gathered to set up a response plan that would serve as an ongoing information resource for hospitals statewide.

Using telephone, fax, e-mail and Website postings, a command team mobilized and met hourly through the first day and into the night of Sept. 11. The result was a seamless flow of information, data and guidelines that was updated for more than a week after the disaster.

Questions and offers of help poured in from hospitals from Sussex County to Cape May. NJHA coordinated answers. Should I hold a backup surgical team past midnight? When can we resume elective procedures? A busload of relief nurses and doctors is ready to drive 80 miles from Atlantic County; where should they go? We're not a designated blood collection site, but people are lining up a block long to donate; what do we do? Can NJHA help with the thousands of family calls seeking information about victims?

In addition, staff maintained links with emergency management officials, the state Department of Health and Senior Services, the Greater New York Hospital Association and the Hospital Association of New York State. Media alerts were sent and regular contact maintained with major news agencies.

"During times like these it's an association's role to be accessible and responsive," said NJHA President and CEO Gary Carter. "The crew here took charge in conveying an important commodity — reliable information — to all our members. They did their jobs well."

Among the scores of dispatches and updates that flowed from the Association's Princeton headquarters, NJHA provided its members with:

- Guidance in interpreting the state's order that all New Jersey's hospitals implement their disaster plans;
- Notice that NJHA and the Jersey City Medical Center, with cooperation from the state, had set up a New Jersey Hospitals Victim Search Line at 201-915-2782;
- Access to a searchable database of patients treated at New Jersey hospitals via NJHA's Website, [www.njha.com](http://www.njha.com);
- A resource list and links to hospitals and agencies offering counseling services;
- Communication with our congressional delegation and federal officials regarding the need for financial aid for hospitals that treated patients and exhausted medical supplies.
- The creation of an NJHA Disaster Victim Support Fund to offer financial and social service support to New Jersey victims and their families. (Checks payable to HRET of NJ and mailed to NJHA Disaster Relief Fund, 760 Alexander Rd., Princeton, NJ 08543.)

The association now plans to coordinate a follow-up "best practices" debriefing of all hospitals and responsible agencies to ensure effective response for future incidents.

Member reactions to NJHA efforts were supportive and appreciative. Said Joan Quigley, vice president for external affairs at the Bon Secours & Canterbury Partnership for Care: "We found NJHA's information invaluable during the entire crisis. Your regular dispatches were timely, accurate and helpful. It was reassuring to know that we were not alone in dealing with this tragedy. We're glad that NJHA staff were all there working with us and for us."



ADDRESS CORRECTION REQUESTED

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Sept. 14 and Sept. 19, the hotline fielded more than 4,500 calls and assisted nearly 500 walk-ins, said Bill Dauster, vice president of development and public affairs for Liberty HealthCare System.

One week after the tragedy, the calls kept coming, said McCreath. Many were from businesses, including large brokerage firms who had employees that escaped the towers but were now facing the traumatic aftermath.

In just one week's time, McCreath's staff had logged 343 counseling hours in the community. And their calendar was booked through at least another week.

"The people we're seeing in the business community today, they're worse than (the first) week," said McCreath. "Once it's clear that there will be no more recovery of survivors, the next wave of crushing emotions will come."

**THE AFTERMATH.** By all accounts, New Jersey's healthcare community performed exceptionally in a most trying time. More than 5,000 individuals came through the emergency triage system, and more than 1,000 patients were treated by 60 New Jersey hospitals. Countless numbers of physicians, nurses, mental

health professionals, pharmacists, paramedics, technicians and others worked bravely and tirelessly.

Dr. Brennan said he's seen his share of emergency medical response, especially during his service in the Air Force during Operation Desert Storm. "I've never seen anything get ready so well and so quickly," he said of New Jersey's emergency response.

Dr. Witt has similar sentiments. "I have never seen such professionalism. And not only that but such a sense of family and camaraderie. We could have handled 10 times more than what we did."

Those efforts have not gone unrecognized. At Jersey City Medical Center, local Congressman Robert Menendez (D-13) stopped by to personally thank hospital staff. "Another touching moment for us was when some family members wanted to thank the staff personally," says Cepero.

And from Washington, D.C., Dick Davidson, president of the American Hospital Association, offered his words of praise: "All of America saw the images of terror and destruction on the scenes of the disasters in New York and Washington. What they didn't see nearly enough of was

the incredible effort of others, and the hospitals of New Jersey are a shining example."

Such accolades are important as medical professionals come to grips with the events of Sept. 11, say those who serve on healthcare's front lines.

"I'm concerned now as we move forward," says Cepero. "As leaders and managers, we have to try to meet our staffs' emotional needs. I think that's going to be around for a long time. At this time, any kind of recognition goes a long way."

In reflections one week after the tragedy, Dr. Brennan sums it up, speaking the mind of New Jersey's entire healthcare community: "I think everyone did an awesome job, but we really wish we could have done more."

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