

Pharmaceuticals: meeting the needs of natural disaster victims



Leslie Morgan (MRPharmS), Managing Director of Durbin PLC in the UK, and member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society of Great Britain, discusses the challenges faced by pharmaceutical agencies following natural disasters, like the recent earthquake in Iran.

Since I wrote the last column for this journal the devastating earthquake in Iran that killed 30,000 people and left thousands of others injured has dominated the headlines. How can any of us not have been touched by the poignant scenes of houses turned into rubble and a few survivors being pulled out of the wreckage days after the quake?

The challenge for aid agencies and multilateral agencies in these crisis situations - usually the result of natural disaster or war - is to act as quickly and effectively as possible. First on the scene are the aid agencies where they assess the situation, set up temporary first-aid points and provide basic humanitarian aid, such as water, food and shelter. The next step - usually within 24 hours of arriving on the scene - is for the team to draw up the list of medicines and medical equipment they urgently need. In the recent case of the earthquake in Iran the requests were mainly for resuscitation equipment, morphine, dextrose with saline solution and antibiotics. This list is

sent out globally to pharmaceutical companies, wholesalers, manufacturers, distributors and local healthcare professionals who either check their store cupboard and send what they can or try to source the request on the aid agency's behalf.

However, if you are a local supplier or healthcare professional faced with such a request and you want to help, this is where certain problems can arise.

First of all you need to establish whether you're being asked for a donation or whether there's a budget available to pay you. If there is a budget, it's always a good idea to confirm in advance who's responsible for payment. Does the aid agency have a budget or is a corporate company offering to foot the bill?

If a pharmaceutical company offers to donate medicines, it is essential to ensure that the use-by dates are still many months ahead. Some companies donate out-of-date medicines that are then rejected by aid agencies and, as the supplier, you could then be responsible for clogging up valuable storage areas and then for disposing the medicines which can be extremely expensive. You also need to know that a local courier might not be able to or might not be the most cost effective way of transporting bulk supplies from A to B. A big load may require a charter plane (or sea freight for on-going needs) and you'll need to

negotiate the best price. Believe it or not, some of the best deals are found in Europe.

Once you have secured a good deal, it's essential to make sure the goods are packed properly, particularly if the journey involves difficult terrain up country; and you may need to organise refrigeration and generator facilities in case the supplies end up sitting on a tarmac due to unforeseen delays.

Depending on the urgency of the request it may even be worth chartering a smaller plane that can carry a four-wheel drive so that the plane can land as close as possible to the disaster zone and then the supplies can be driven cross-country to where they're needed most.

Finally you need to make sure you arrange a translation of the patient-user information into the relevant language so that aid workers can administer the drug safely.

Durbin PLC gets involved with so many different projects and they're all important to the company. But helping out in this kind of crisis situation where people are so dependent on the company is extremely rewarding. What could be more significant than saving a life? In my opinion, this is what being in this industry is all about.

* In the next issue, Leslie Morgan will look at the increasing usage of generic pharmaceuticals. ■

Durbin PLC is a British company based in South Harrow, London. Established in 1963, the company specialises in supplying quality assured pharmaceuticals, medical equipment and consumable supplies to healthcare professionals and aid agencies in over 145 countries. As well as reacting rapidly to emergency situations, Durbin PLC responds to healthcare supply needs from local project level to national scale programmes.
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