

IN THE NEWS

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Hospitals brace for twisters' devastation

Facilities don't just receive victims; they can be hit, too.

BY KIM ARCHER
 World Staff Writer

When scores of tornadoes ripped through the southern Plains, including Oklahoma, on May 3, 1999, it made a particular impression on Anthony Young.

As its president and chief executive officer, he had spent the day overseeing the opening of Southcrest Hospital. The first baby had been born and the first emergency-room patient seen.

As he listened to weather reports at home that evening, he learned that tornadoes had turned toward Tulsa.

"The tornadoes came through Stroud and headed straight for us," Young said.

When anchors at a local TV news station signed off the air to take cover, he was stunned. He called a "Code Black" to ensure that all patients were moved away from windows and to the hallways.

"I couldn't believe it. I just prayed it wouldn't hit the hospital," he said.

It didn't.

But 48 Oklahomans died that day as 66 tornadoes slashed their way through Oklahoma and Kansas.

"After that day, I decided I wanted to do anything I could to make sure we are prepared to be struck by a tornado," Young said. "It's not a matter of if, but when."

He was one of 300 hospital personnel who attended a recent symposium on tornado



A home on U.S. 70 was destroyed in a deadly tornado in Lone Grove on Feb. 11. STEVE SISNEY/The Oklahoman

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preparation at the University of Oklahoma in Tulsa.

"(Hospitals) all plan to receive casualties from a tornado. Most don't plan to be the casualty from a tornado," said Dr. Charles Stewart, the director of research at the Oklahoma Institute for Disaster and Emergency Medicine.

"Yet, we are squarely in tornado alley. It can happen here. In this neck of the woods, this is not unthinkable," he said.

Stewart planned and coordinated the symposium, bringing in experts on construction design and disaster preparedness and an administrator at a hospital that the Federal Emergency Management Agency says is the only one in the U.S. to have been destroyed by a tornado.

"Normally, as a hospital, we are the recipients of victims of disaster. But that night, we were the disaster," said Susie Fussell, the vice president and chief nursing officer of Sumter Regional Hospital in Americus, Ga.

She told attendees about the night in 2007 when an F3 tornado devastated Sumter Regional. Amazingly, nobody in the hospital was killed.

Hospital personnel were warned by telephone that a severe storm cell was headed to the area, Fussell said. They had just minutes to move patients into hallways.

From her home, she called a Code Black and ordered nurses to take new babies to their mothers.

"I am so glad the nursery was empty because after the tornado it was covered with shards of glass and debris. And there was water pouring in because the cooling system shifted and water lines rup-

tured," Fussell said.

After the tornado had done its damage, hospital personnel had to move out patients and set up a triage area to evaluate injured people and send them to other medical centers in other towns, she said.

"This wasn't just a hospital problem. This was a health-care problem for us," Fussell said. "The whole campus was wiped out, including 10 or 11 physicians' offices."

Fussell said she was proud of how her staff acted and said it was all because they had practiced disaster drills frequently.

Stewart said he set up the symposium so local hospitals

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Anthony Young
 on tornado preparedness after the May 3, 1999, tornadoes

could learn from Fussell's experience.

"Plans for a disaster are required by the Joint Commission. The question is 'Is this plan a complete one?' and 'Does it cover something happening to the hospital itself?'" he said.

Several Hillcrest Medical Center employees attended the symposium, said Matthew Sharpe, the hospital's safety manager. And both St. John Medical Center and St. Francis Hospital have plans in case a tornado strikes, hospital representatives said.

Southcrest's Young said he is planning to make at least one change after he learned from Fussell that roofs covered with river rocks are dangerous in tornadoes.

"With winds of 165 miles per hour, the river rocks become missiles," Fussell said.

Said Stewart: "There's an old principle of war that you always prepare for the last war. Well, our last war was an ice storm. I say, let's plan for the next war."

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