

# Pharmacists' responses to natural disasters: Insights into the soul of pharmacists and our role in society

IN THIS ISSUE, WE FEATURE AN ARTICLE FROM DENISE A. EPP, A Canadian now living in Japan (and obtaining her PhD in pharmacy). She tells the stories of how pharmacists in Japan and Canada have responded to major disasters. After the Tohoku earthquake-tsunami-nuclear disaster, Yoshirou Tanno, despite his significant personal losses, immediately helped to set up the emergency evacuation centre in the local school, coordinated pharmacist volunteers to get people their medications and set up a temporary pharmacy. She also tells the story of Anita and Bob Brown in Okotoks, Alberta, and the services they provided to patients from nearby High River, which had been particularly hard hit by the floods of June 2013. Ms. Brown was one of the first Alberta pharmacists to receive her prescribing authorization, and the overrun local health centre began to direct patients to see her. The Browns courageously mobilized their staff to provide care to the many displaced patients who needed their help. Read the article—it's heartwarming and inspirational.

As a follow-up to this story, on April 14 to 16 of this year, the Kumamoto area of Japan was struck with several earthquakes and aftershocks. Ms. Epp emailed me in May to tell me that Mr. Tanno was there—1600 km from his home—providing emergency pharmacy services. Because he has lived through such a disaster, he has a unique rapport with the latest earthquake victims.

As I write this, the tragic wildfires in Fort McMurray and surrounding area are ongoing. The evacuation of Fort McMurray has resulted in 40,000 people temporarily relocating to Edmonton, often with nothing but the clothes on their backs. I spoke to Deb Van Haaften, Executive Director, Pharmacy, Edmonton Zone, Alberta Health Services, who, along with Sandra Leung (the pharmacist in charge of home care services), are providing administrative leadership during the crisis. When I spoke to her, Ms. Van Haaften had just completed a shift at



**Mr. Tanno's vest and helmet, which identify him as a pharmacist at the disaster sites (photo credit: Yoshirou Tanno).**

the evacuation centre set up at the Northlands Expo complex. The centre has been providing food, clothing, shelter and health care support for evacuees. She got the call last week—Alberta

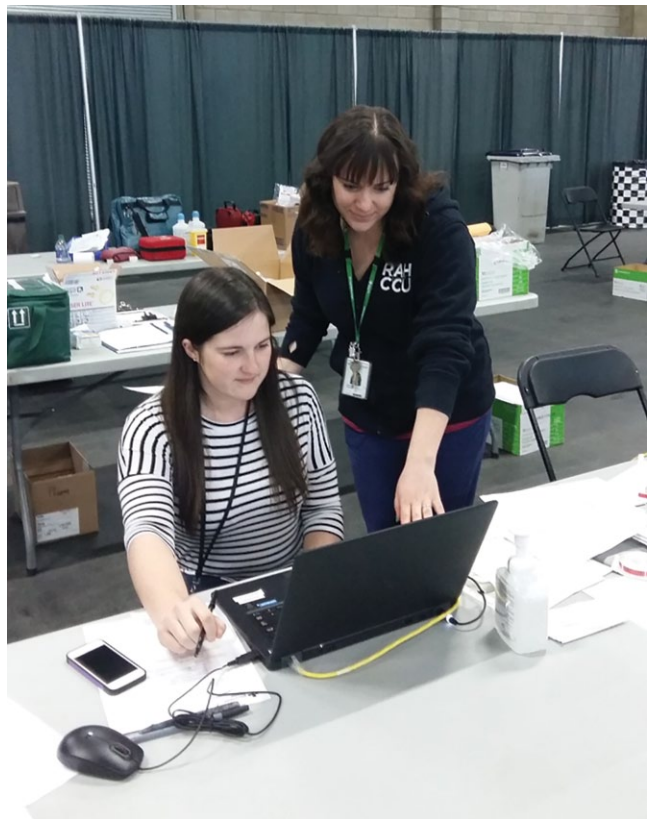


**One of Japan's 3 mobile pharmacy vans arrived in the Kumamoto area the day after the second earthquake struck (photo credit: Denise A. Epp).**

Health Services wanted pharmacists to be there 24 hours a day. Interestingly, they didn't want pharmacists to dispense drugs but rather to assess patients and prescribe their medications. I repeat, Alberta Health Services wanted pharmacists for their ability to prescribe, not dispense. Pharmacists are also helping assess patients' coverage of medications. For those unable to pay, they have set up a partnership with a community pharmacy, and Alberta Health Services is covering the costs. And they have even set up a shuttle bus to take patients from the evacuation centre to the pharmacy. They have also been asked to help patients requiring methadone and tuberculosis therapies.

Yesterday, the first pharmacist (from the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Edmonton) was sent to the field hospital set up in Fort MacMurray. Her mission will be to serve the first responders' needs. And the challenges continue: as of today, they have noted acute diarrheal illnesses in many evacuees, likely a Norwalk or similar virus.

In all of this, hospital pharmacists have volunteered to help, 24/7. The Royal Alexandra Hospital pharmacy is busy



**This is the scene at the Northlands Expo Centre where pharmacists are busy assessing and prescribing for victims of the Fort McMurray disaster (photo credit: Deb Van Haften).**

restocking emergency medical supplies. Many community pharmacies have also stepped up to meet the needs of patients.

These are all very different tragedies. But I note a few strong themes: courage, selflessness, and above all, patient-centredness. This is an inspiring demonstration (and recognition) of the role that we play in society. Indeed, the actions of these and other pharmacists in the face of disasters could be a defining moment for pharmacy. ■