U.S. Hospitals Resume Care for Injured Haitians

BY ROBERT FINN

Medical evacuations of patients critically injured in Haiti's devastating earthquake to hospitals in the United States resumed on Feb. 1, following a 5-day interruption.

The exact cause of the interruption appears to be under dispute. According to published reports, some sources said the issue involved how hospitals would be reimbursed for caring for these patients. Other sources cited a lack of capacity at hospitals in Florida, where most of the patients had been sent.

White House spokesman Tommy Vietor said that logistical problems had caused the interruption. He pointed to difficulties in locating appropriate medical facilities that were close to airports capable of handling large military transport planes.

Whatever the cause, the flights resumed the day after Kathleen Sebelius, Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services, activated components of the National Disaster Medical System (NDMS). With this announcement, hospitals that are part of the NDMS could be assured that the federal government would pay them for the patients' care at 110% of the Medicare reimbursement rate.

The flights were halted on Jan. 27, shortly after Florida Governor Charlie Crist wrote a letter to Secretary Sebelius stating that medical facilities in Florida were "quickly reaching saturation, especially in the area of high-level trauma care."

In that letter, Governor Crist also pointed to a "lack of coordination by federal authorities" overseeing the evacuations. He noted that 436 patients had been admitted to Florida hospitals, with more than 90% suffering from multiple traumas.

"Recently, we learned that federal planning is underway to move between

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30-50 critically ill patients per day for an indefinite period of time," Governor Crist's letter continued. "Florida does not have the capacity to support such an operation."

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is coordinating the government's response to the earthquake. In a statement announcing the activation of the NDMS, USAID administrator Dr. Rajiv Shah stated, "Medical evacuations have only been used in limited instances where patients had medical needs that could not be met in Haiti. We are committed to working with the Haitian people and the Government of Haiti to create long-term care facilities in-country. Continued medical assistance is critical to these efforts."

In a Feb. 1 statement responding to the NDMS activation, Governor Crist said that "Florida is grateful to our federal partners for taking steps to activate the National Disaster Medical System. The quick response to my letter last week to Secretary Sebelius will ensure that critically injured survivors of the Haiti earthquake will continue to receive the medical care they so desperately need."

Governor Crist noted that Florida had committed to welcoming 19,000 people from Haiti including, as of that date, 526 patients who were receiving critical medical care.

"Florida's hospitals, doctors, nurses and medical teams are at the forefront of caring for survivors, both here in Florida and in Haiti," he continued. "For their tireless efforts, I commend their dedication to promptly and compassionately serving those in need."

The day following the NDMS announcement, medical evacuation flights resumed, arriving in Tampa and Atlanta. Hospitals in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Lyons, N.J., were also alerted that patients might be sent to those facilities. ■