

Pharmacy 911: Tornado Hits Montello Pharmacy

Rebuilding amid legal, regulatory and service issues

by Heather Swartz

Wisconsin pharmacists are usually very lucky when it comes to natural disasters: their pharmacies are not threatened by the tropical storms or hurricanes of the East Coast or the earthquakes, wildfires and mudslides of the West. However, one night of severe weather this past summer changed that for a pharmacy in a small Wisconsin community.

On the night of June 23, an F-1 tornado struck Montello, bringing down many trees and heavily damaging several businesses, including Montello's Aurora Pharmacy. Jeff Sveum, the store's managing pharmacist, was listening to his police scanner at the time of the storm and realized that his pharmacy was in the area of Montello hit by the tornado. Hearing rumors of looting, Sveum drove from his home in a neighboring town and, when he found that Montello was closed off, "snuck in the back way" to retrieve the pharmacy's controlled substances and cash and take them to the safety of his home.

Although the reports of looting turned out to be unfounded, Sveum was right to think of securing the pharmacy's narcotics and valuables: the tornado had ripped the roof from a business across the parking lot from the pharmacy and smashed it through the pharmacy's storefront, blowing out the store's windows. The pharmacy's roof, ceiling tiles and light fixtures were also gone, and drugs and other merchandise were destroyed by the water damage from the storm. While prescription medications stored in plastic containers could be salvaged, any merchandise packaged in cardboard, particularly over-the-counter (OTC) products, was destroyed. "Eighty percent of the OTC merchandise was in cardboard boxes, and that was all trashed," Sveum said.

Rob Bednarski, Aurora's senior insurance analyst, estimates the pharmacy's losses from the tornado to be \$110,000. This number includes lost inventory (mainly OTCs); damage to interior furnishings of the pharmacy, including shelves, cash register, carpeting, drywall and counters; and loss of business. Because Aurora leases the space for the pharmacy, the landlord is responsible for all structural repairs to the building itself.

AFTER THE STORM: CONTINUING PATIENT SERVICE

In the aftermath of the tornado, the first concern of Sveum and the Aurora organization was to develop a plan to continue service to pharmacy patients in the Montello area. The Montello store's phone and fax numbers were temporarily transferred to the Aurora Pharmacy in Appleton, where prescriptions were filled and mailed to patients. "We communicated to customers that we would be happy to fill their prescriptions from another site," said John Gates, regional director of pharmacy operations for Aurora Pharmacy. This plan allowed Montello residents to receive maintenance medications within 24 hours.

The pharmacy's next challenge was to set up temporary quarters from which to fill prescriptions until the store could be repaired and reopened. Within three weeks of the tornado, Sveum was able to operate from a construction trailer set up near the original pharmacy. The trailer is outfitted with built-in shelves, a computer, and prescription stock, and Sveum says he's "got everything he needs in the trailer." As of late August, repairs on the original pharmacy were underway, with the rebuilding process anticipated to take one to two months.



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Along with the patient care and logistical challenges facing the Montello Aurora Pharmacy, emergency situations like this also raise unique legal and regulatory issues. In a fortunate coincidence, Wisconsin's Pharmacy Examining Board (PEB) was in session when the call came in from Aurora Pharmacy asking for guidance. PEB member Sue Sutter was appointed liaison to the Montello Aurora Pharmacy and worked with PEB legal counsel to assist in advising the pharmacy on how to handle the situation.

EMERGENCY OPERATING PROCEDURES

A pharmacy license is granted to a specific physical location, and even moving pharmacy operations next door requires a new license. The Montello pharmacy was faced with the question of how to continue providing patient care when damage to the licensed location prevented normal pharmacy functioning and service to patients. Complicating matters further is the fact that Wisconsin law provides no guidance for emergency situations. "Nothing in the regulations addresses a case like this," Sutter said.

Yet the ongoing threat of terrorist attacks, as well as the potential for fires or natural disasters to hit pharmacies, has raised awareness that regulatory guidance is needed on the issue of emergency pharmacy operating procedures. Sutter recalls that a pharmacist from the Fond du Lac area contacted the PEB shortly after 9/11 because the pharmacist was working with the community on an emergency services plan and needed direction about what steps pharmacies should take to quickly set up operations in the wake of a terrorist attack or other emergency. The PEB responded by drafting a scope statement two years ago which addresses emergency situations.

"Nothing in the regulations currently addresses these sorts of situations, but patient care requires us to do something until the location can function normally," said Sutter. "The consensus is that allowing the pharmacy to operate with a temporary setup is the right thing to do." Sutter says that while such temporary pharmacy sites may have a makeshift professional area, they must be secure locations with alarm systems. According to Sutter, the general idea is to duplicate as many of the Chapter 6 Administrative Code Rules for pharmacy licenses and equipment as possible in the temporary setting. "The main issue is to secure the drugs and protect information about patients."

Aurora Pharmacy found the PEB to be very willing to work with the Montello store, and the PEB granted a temporary license for the pharmacy to operate from the construction trailer. Aurora kept the Board apprised of what it was doing as far as switching phone lines to the Apple-



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ton pharmacy and restoring security at the Montello location. Aurora also worked with the regional Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) office. "Both the PEB and the DEA were great in their willingness to work with us," said John Gates. "They realized the need to continue patient service to the people in the area."

EMERGENCY PLANNING

Customer response to the whole situation has been largely positive. "Most patients

have been understanding, and our business has been pretty much the same," Sveum said. "Our prescription volume has gone down 10%, at most." The Montello community also proved to be supportive immediately after the storm, when many people came to help clean up the pharmacy.

Having been through this trying situation, what advice would Jeff Sveum have to offer to other pharmacists faced with an emergency? "Have a plan of action," he said. "Aurora didn't really have a protocol [for handling emergencies], and the first few days after the storm were a little chaotic." Sveum suggests that chain pharmacies consider having a trailer outfitted for emergency use, as it took three weeks for the trailer used in Montello to be ready. "With a trailer already set up, a pharmacy could probably begin operating from it in less than a week." Sveum also noted that pharmacists may want to work on emergency preparedness plans with pharmacy insurers such as Pharmacists Mutual.

Good communication also plays a vital role in effectively handling a pharmacy emergency, says Ron Irwin, public relations manager for Aurora Health Care. "We let the community know, through signage at the pharmacy and contacting the local newspaper, that we would continue to provide service to the community and would be bringing the pharmacy back into operation," he said. The community was quickly notified that prescriptions could be filled in both the immediate crisis situation (through the mail order arrangement with the Appleton pharmacy) and in the long term (from the temporary trailer setup).

Although providing pharmacy services in an emergency situation can be challenging, the Montello Aurora Pharmacy's response to last summer's tornado illustrates how quick thinking, ingenuity and good communication can allow for continued patient care in an emergency. It also heightens awareness of the importance of emergency preparedness in the pharmacy setting. ●

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