

# **A catastrophe in your community!**

**Stevan Cordas DO MPH**

**DFW Metroplex Medical Reserve Corps**

**Abstract: The Medical reserve Corps is an important new organization to help protect America's health needs in the face of a natural or terrorist generated disaster. This article discusses the role of the health care provider, why to join and how to join.**

**What would you do if a terrorist incident created mass casualties in your town or county? America has changed. It is no longer a place of innocence. Ignorance and apathy should be replaced by vigilance and cooperation. At no time have the words of John F. Kennedy become more relevant –“Ask not what your country can do for you but what you can do for your country.”**

**Immediately after the 9/11 incidents, well-meaning health care workers inundated New York City. Few knew what to do, where to go or were trained in dealing with casualties and working within a coordinated system. As a result of this and other recent catastrophes, it has become clear that we need a coordinated local medical response team to be activated in case the first responders (local emergency rooms) are overwhelmed.**

**Communities all over the country are forming such coordinated groups of physicians, nurses, psychologists, pharmacist, nurses aids and nurse practitioners and physician assistants. This organization is known as the Medical Reserve Corps (MRC). Many health care professionals are joining the MRC but more are needed. In spite of its military sounding name, the MRC is a local voluntary organization. Those physicians who have moral convictions to be prepared and assist if disaster strikes, are now able to become a part of an organized team.**

**The first 72 hours after a natural or man-made disaster are critical to save lives, manage stress responses, deal with families and relay information rapidly and effectively. Communities need medically trained individuals to respond and relieve the burden on the first responders. You may already know how to perform some of the medical and health functions so desperately needed. In most cases, the training as an MRC volunteer will focus primarily on learning local emergency and health procedures, trauma response techniques, use of specialized equipment, and other methods to enhance effectiveness as a volunteer. Perhaps the most important part of MRC training will be learning to work as part of a team. An organized, well-trained MRC unit will be familiar with its community's response plan, will know what materials are available for use,**

will know its response partners, and will know where its skills can be put to best use and in a coordinated manner.

Sometimes the MRC is activated to perform functions inappropriate in an emergency room setting. As an example, if suspected smallpox was to occur in your town, a large number of volunteers already trained in administering smallpox vaccination would be required to vaccinate the community. This would require teamwork and good communication.

Medical Reserve Corps volunteers also offer education and prevention services to improve the public health infrastructure of their neighborhoods and communities. This is the type of activity that only the Medical Reserve Corps can do to assist the public health department. The MRC serves as the flexible manpower to ensure the best quality of medical services in any disaster. Both practicing and retired physicians as well as other licensed medical professionals in all disciplines are welcome to join.

After 48 to 72 hours, State and Federal responses would be expected to take over if they are needed.

### **Medical Reserve Corps**

George W. Bush, as a response to the 9/11 attacks, established the US Freedom Corps. The primary purpose is to permit the public to volunteer to make America a better and safer place. It consists of 4 National service programs, the Americorps, Peace Corps, Citizen Corps and the Senior Corps. The Medical Reserve Corps is a part of the Citizens Corps. The Medical Reserve Corps program office is in the office of the Surgeon General of the United States.

### **Why Join**

Disaster Medicine is not a part of a medical curriculum. In these unpredictable time physicians, nurses, psychologist and other health care professionals should strongly consider learning about this area and decide what role they would play in combating disaster or mass casualty incidents. The American Medical Association (AMA), in cooperation with four major medical centers, announced, on June 16<sup>th</sup> 2003, the establishment of training courses to better prepare health care professionals and emergency response personnel for mass casualty events. The courses aim to standardize emergency response nationwide. The National Disaster Life Support Education Consortium was formed accordingly and has approved certification (through the AMA) in Core Disaster Life Support (CLDS), Basic disaster Life Support (BLDS) and Advanced Disaster Life Support (ADLS). The Basic Disaster Life Support (BDLS) course teaches an all-hazards recognition and management

approach to disaster response. It contains several chapters under the acronym D-I-S-A-S-T-E-R (D-detect, I-incident command, S-scene security and safety, A-assess hazards, S-support, T-triage/treatment, E-evacuation, R-recovery). Mass triage and disaster casualty zones are emphasized using military categories to triage large numbers of victims quickly.

Advance Disaster Life Support (ADLS) training is the next level and targets building on the knowledge of BDLS-certified individuals. The curriculum consists of interactive scenarios and drills, focusing on hands-on skills drawn from the BDLS course work. Exercises include high-fidelity mannequins and focus on topics such as decontamination and use of protective equipment, subjects not covered in the medical education of most health care professionals. The AMA will validate and provide CME credit for both courses, and is developing a distance-learning (the ability to take the course over the Internet) module for the two.

In addition other reasons to consider participating include:

- Opportunities for other continuing medical education activities, often free.
- Educational programs that cover areas of medicine not generally covered well in medical school such as toxicology, incident command, etc.
- Tabletop exercise, community drills or hands on training are provided.
- The health care professional will be involved in a meaningful response in the event that medical assistance is required in your community.
- Fulfill an ethical, moral responsibility to your family and neighbors, and community.

## **Liability Issues**

New laws protect all personal responding to a public health emergency, when functioning under the auspices of a governmental entity empowered by gubernatorial direction.

## **How to join**

Contact Office of the Surgeon General  
U.S Dept. of Health and Human Services  
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 18-66  
Phone 301-443- 4951  
Fax 301- 480-1163  
[www.medicalreservecorps.gov](http://www.medicalreservecorps.gov)

**This office will put you in contact with the closest MRC.**

**If in Tarrant County contact:** Rebecca M. Coulborn  
Tarrant County Public Health  
817-321-4877  
817-321-5338 fax  
rmcoulborn@tarrantcounty.com  
<http://health.tarrantcounty.com>

**If in Dallas County contact:** Phyllis Kutach  
Dallas County Department of Health and  
Human Services  
972-692-2711  
214-819-2099 fax  
pkutach@dallascounty.org

## **Summary**

**The Medical Reserve Corps is a Federal Initiative project that is organized and manned at a county or community level. At times several counties combine to form an effective team. The Health care professionals are volunteers who feel a sense of duty to act in a coordinated manner for the protection of their community. The MRC is involved in both proactive and retroactive activities to support the first responders and the public health system in case of terrorist attacks or natural disasters. On-going training is available but voluntary.**



**Dr. Cordas is in private practice in Hurst. He is a clinical Associate Professor at TCOM/UNTHSC, a consultant to the Texas Department of Health on bioterrorism education, author of a series on weapons of mass destruction (AOA). He practices toxicology, allergy and disability medicine and is on the oversight committee of the Metroplex Medical Emergency Preparedness Alliance (DFW Medical Reserve Corps)**