

PREPARED TESTIMONY

of

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before the

COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS

SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS

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334 Cannon House Office Building

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Introduction

I am Val G. Hemming, M.D., Colonel, United States Air Force, retired, Dean of the F. Edward Hébert School of Medicine of the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences (USUHS), our Nation's only military school of medicine. Thank you for inviting me to share my views regarding the present responsibility of medical educators to ensure that the Nation's primary care practitioners are educated, trained and prepared for the challenges of weapons of mass destruction (WMD).

Background

Military physicians and military medicine planners and educators have long expected that foes of the United States would resort to the offensive use of WMD. Memories of World War I, when chlorine and phosgene gas were used as weapons, the knowledge that the world powers had weaponized chemical and biological agents such as anthrax, and vivid images of the use of chemical weapons in the Middle East, made it mandatory for American practitioners of uniformed medicine to be educated, trained and prepared to treat casualties of WMD.

Therefore, since the arrival of its first class in 1976, USUHS has provided in-depth instruction for more than 3,100 USUHS School of Medicine graduates regarding the recognition, diagnosis, management and decontamination of persons exposed to WMD. To my knowledge, USUHS is the only school of medicine in the United States with WMD as a formal part of its curriculum.

USUHS and WMD

In the few minutes allotted to me, it is not my intention to inform you of the entire content of USUHS' educational programs in the area of WMD other than to affirm that for more than twenty years, USUHS has integrated WMD-related education and training throughout its standard basic medical science and clinical sciences medical school curricula. Where appropriate, this background knowledge is supplemented with specific WMD course work. All such courses are organized and taught by experienced active duty and retired uniformed subject matter experts, who also prepare the students for two practical field exercises: Operation Kerkesner and the Bushmaster Exercise. These exercises require our military medical students to demonstrate their WMD education and training during rigorous, graded, week-long combat simulations at the Marine Corps base at Quantico, Virginia, conducted at the end of the first year of medical school and at Camp Bullis, Texas, conducted during the fourth medical school year.

A Solution Using Existing Accrediting Organizations and Procedures

It is evident that modern care health practitioners must be knowledgeable regarding potential WMD agents, risks for their use, detection, diagnosis, decontamination and treatment of patients who might, or have, documented exposure, injury or illness inflicted by WMD. I believe that the most effective means for ensuring the proper education and training for potential first providers for WMD victims and for ensuring the maintenance of essential knowledge and skills is to incorporate a basic set of nationally-mandated education and skill objectives into the Liaison Committee for Medical Education (LCME) -mandated requirements for granting the M.D. Degree. At the residency level of training, additional requirements should be developed in partnership with the Accreditation Council on Graduate Medical Education (ACGME) to add basic WMD education and training to the general requirements for the Residency Review Committee (RRC)/ACGME accreditation of all residency programs. This recommendation is based on the premise that **all** physicians, regardless of specialty, should have a basic understanding of the WMD agents and the potential ways they may be addressed during war or terrorism. Physicians must be able to recognize patterns of illness, means of diagnosis and potential therapeutic measures. Further, I also propose that States include WMD requirements in their licensure processes for primary care providers. Credentialing would then require biennial educational updates before privileges could be renewed. The Joint Commission for Accreditation of Hospitals and Health Organizations (JCAHO) could also expand its standards for disaster preparedness to include the ability of accredited organizations to recognize patterns of illness, and the means to diagnose and treat potential and confirmed WMD.

The North American system for the voluntary setting of standards for the training and certification of health care practitioners has served the Nation well over the past 50 years. This system must be revised with mandatory requirements to ensure that practitioners are prepared to serve their respective communities during these challenging times.

USUHS/Department of Veterans Affairs and WMD Education and Training

Recognizing the substantial experience, existing educational materials at USUHS, and the recognized expertise within each of the Services, USUHS could quickly develop courses, teaching materials and web based materials for use by other medical schools, residency programs, and by the JCAHO.

I thank you for the opportunity to address you today.