Health care in danger: Making the case

Armed conflict and internal disturbances – such as violent protests and riots – cause injuries among those directly participating and those who get caught in the way. Serious injuries require medical attention, yet it is precisely at these moments of greatest need that health-care services are most vulnerable to disruption, interference and attack. Violence, both actual and threatened, affects the delivery of health care in several ways. First, active fighting in the vicinity of health-care facilities prevents access to them by the wounded and the sick, health-care staff, and vehicles carrying essential medicines and medical equipment to resupply these facilities. Fighting can also disrupt the flow of water and electricity, as well as fuel supplies for back-up generators. [...] Second, violence can set off the displacement of civilians, including health-care personnel and their families, to safer areas. [...] Third, violence hampers the implementation of important preventive health-care programmes (such as vaccination campaigns), which might have implications long into the future. [...] Furthermore, conflict causes the displacement of people to areas that are often beyond the reach of regular health-care systems, just at the moment when they are most vulnerable to disease. These disruptions to health care caused by violence are less visible and more difficult to measure than overt attacks against health-care personnel and facilities. But they are just as deadly for all the wounded and sick who never manage to reach the help they require.*†

Source: __________. 2011. Health care in danger: making the case. *International Committee of the Red Cross online (10 August).*

Foodborne outbreaks: Managing risks

The deadly outbreak of Escherichia coli (E. coli) infection in Germany raised fears and questions about food safety in well-regulated countries. [In this interview, Maged Younes, Director of the Department of food safety at the World Health Organization, discusses the outbreak. According to Younes, “It will take time to fully assess all of the lessons to be gleaned from the events in Germany, but a few points can be highlighted. Outbreaks of foodborne disease are particularly likely to have economic implications as they often involve commercially produced products. Consumers will often react to concerns about a particular food by avoiding consumption of similar products, even if there is no evidence to warrant it. To manage the risk of harming the public, governments must assess the evidence and make decisions to protect people’s health, even if there may be economic consequences. What was unusual about this event was the broad recommendation to avoid eating three entire groups of foods. [...] While such broad warnings can be justified, having them in place for an extended period of time can inflict economic damage and destroy livelihoods, even outside the affected country, as seen in this case. However, it must be stressed that public health authorities must always balance the health risk to the population against other undesirable consequences.”]̅