

Medical Supplies for Emergency Medical Actions

The following circular letter was sent by the ICRC and League chief medical officers to all the National Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies with a view to rationalizing consignments of medicaments and medical material for emergency medical actions. The circular letter contains practical advice and precise rules to be observed when selecting and packaging emergency relief medicaments.

The success of emergency action in cases of natural disaster or armed conflict depends of the degree of preparedness of personnel and material: it is not necessarily proportional to the number of volunteers or the volume of relief supplies hastily dispatched.

The sending of material and medicaments is not an end in itself: it is an integral part of the whole action and as such must be adapted in quantity and quality to the needs of the users. In either respect, inappropriate consignments are not only a waste but can also disrupt emergency relief work by causing users to lose valuable time.

Medicaments in particular can present a real danger to patients if they are not administered to the right people at the right time and in the correct dosage.

In order to carry out their difficult task in emergency situations, national medical teams and those sent in to reinforce them must have a sufficient quantity of essential medicaments and medical material readily available, and every effort must be made to see that their stocks are regularly replenished.

Donations well organized according to ICCR and League directives would help attain this goal and would make it easier to overcome transport, storage and distribution problems. The appropriate selection and packaging of consignments, with a standardized system of labeling, would help avoid the distribution problems so often encountered by emergency teams. In this way, the unfortunately classic

situatiuon of a warehouse filled to overflowing with tons of hastily sent and not assorted medical supplies, in which the medical teams have not hope of locating the particular medicaments they urgently require, should no longer arise.

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CIRCULAR

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To be effective in emergency situations the medical supplies have to be adapted to the needs in quantity and quality. Inappropriate supply of drugs and medical material is not only a waste but could also be dangerous for the population in need of medical treatment and disrupt the medical action.

ICRC/LORCS have established the following procedures which should always be applied when sending medical supplies for emergency actions:

1. During disaster relief operations, donating Societies should send only the standard drugs and medical material listed by ICRC and LORCS:¹
for the LORCS: League Standard Drug List (which also includes clinic equipment).
for the ICRC: Standard Emergency Units.
The two lists are required because of the differing types of actions and needs, e.g. natural disaster (LORCS) and armed conflict (ICRC). The guidelines below are, however, common to both ICRC and LORCS.
2. All donated drugs should be labelled according to their generic names.
3. Expiry date of drugs must be later than 6 months after the estimated date of arrival in the country of use.
4. Instructions and labels of packs should be in the appropriate language for the receiving country and/or in English, French or Spanish.
5. Doctors' samples and other ill-assorted drugs in small amounts are not acceptable.

6. To facilitate the identification of drugs and medical equipment, a green band 5 centimetres (2 inches) wide should be marked on at least two sides of each package. In addition contents should be listed on the outside of all packages in the appropriate language. This will facilitate customs clearance and storage.
 7. Before dispatching drugs and supplies from one National Society to another in time of natural disaster, the donating Society should inform LORCS about the planned consignment and obtain its approval to ensure that the type and quantity corresponds to the needs of that particular action, in order to avoid wastage of time, money and labour. In the case of man-made disasters (armed conflicts), all medical relief supplies are channelled through ICRC and have to be approved by its medical division before dispatch.
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