

Richland Doctors Prepare to Respond to Nepal Earthquake



By Kristi Pihl, Tri-City Herald

Surgeons who work with Richland's SIGN Fracture Care International are preparing to provide whatever help is needed to treat the broken limbs of victims of a magnitude 7.8 earthquake in Nepal.

Dr. Lewis Zirkle said the Richland nonprofit is waiting for the Nepalese surgeons who partner with SIGN to tell him exactly what help and equipment is needed.

"We are ready to go, and we want to go when they need us," said Zirkle, SIGN founder and one of the surgeons who will travel to Nepal.

First response focuses on search and rescue and treating people with life-threatening injuries, Zirkle said. Orthopedic injuries tend to not be life-threatening, although they can radically impact someone's life and livelihood.

Typically, it takes about a week before hospitals are able to start treating fractures of tibia, femur and humerus bones, he said. Those are all fractures that SIGN's intramedullary nails can be used to treat, and fractures Zirkle expects local surgeons will see after the earthquake.

SIGN's solid, stainless steel nails are implanted into the canal of broken bones, cutting hospital visits short and allowing patients to return home and continue to provide for their families. SIGN's nails and equipment are designed to be used when X-ray machines are not available and do not depend on electricity. The nails are manufactured at the nonprofit's Richland headquarters.

SIGN has experience responding to earthquakes, including helping treat victims of earthquakes in Haiti, Indonesia and Pakistan.

Currently, 11 hospitals in Nepal partner with SIGN, with more than 50 surgeons from those hospitals trained to use SIGN's equipment and implants, Zirkle said.

The Richland nonprofit just started working with Bayalpata, a hospital in Badelgada, about 200 miles from Kathmandu, Nepal's capital city, Zirkle said. That hospital just received its first shipment of equipment and supplies from SIGN a few weeks ago.

In addition to Zirkle, surgeons from the U.S. and SIGN partner hospitals in Bangladesh and other countries have already volunteered to respond to Nepal when needed, he said. He expects he could easily ask about 1,000 surgeons to go. The nonprofit also will help find support staff if needed.

SIGN will help provide general medical supplies such as sutures and bandages in addition to SIGN supplies and equipment, Zirkle said.

Getting to Nepal may be a challenge. To respond to Haiti after a 2010 earthquake, SIGN used private planes to get help and supplies into the area, Zirkle said. He's already contacting those who may be able to help SIGN fly in people and supplies.

For more information about SIGN and to donate go to <http://signfracturecare.org/>. Money also can be sent to SIGN Fracture Care International, 451 Hills St., Suite B, Richland, WA, 99354.

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