

SUNY educator helps find ways to ease nuke-scare panic

By JEREMIAH HORRIGAN

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Vermeulen is the deputy director of the Institute for Disaster Mental Health at SUNY New Paltz.

She's written a training course the state Health Department will soon begin offering to hospital staff, social workers, clergy and any professionals likely to be part of any effort to deal with what's become known euphemistically as a "radiological event."

Thinking the unthinkable and finding ways for people to deal with it is the institute's stock in trade. It offers training to people in the helping professions who can be expected to be called on when a large-scale disaster strikes.

If there's a message the training course presents, it is this: not everything — be it a dirty bomb, a nuclear attack or nuclear accident — is as "worst-case" as it might at first appear.

Of course, a disaster on the scale of Japan's would result in widespread panic and rampant misinformation.

In addition to the chaos that will confront both the general population and those charged with helping them, diagnostic distinctions and careful risk assessment will have to be made, Vermeulen said.

There are matters of degree that come into play that people may not be aware of, she said.

For example, someone could be contaminated — as were 17 U.S. military personnel who flew over the damaged nuclear plant in Japan — whose exposure was so slight they would only need to shower thoroughly.

"The big question with exposure is that it can range from the equivalent of a sunburn to something so severe as to result in acute radiation syndrome," Vermeulen said. The latter can be fatal.

In another scenario, she said, the blast from a dirty bomb could be more dangerous than exposure to nuclear material.

"People have an idea that any sort of nuclear exposure is automatically fatal, but the data just doesn't support that."

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