

Earthquake 1989 - Watsonville

# After the quake, 10-27-89 health problems multiplied

## Doctors give health advice

Doctors at Salud para la Gente give these recommendations for anyone who has had to seek temporary shelter, or is living in potentially unsanitary conditions:

- Wash hands before preparing food.
- Keep food refrigerated or on ice.
- Avoid food that hasn't been properly refrigerated.
- See a doctor if diarrhea symptoms persist for more than two or three days.
- If using donated blankets, try to wash them if possible.
- Find adequate sanitation facilities, even if just a portable toilet at a camp.





Dr. Paul Yost at Salud para la Gente talks about Pablo Chavaire's bronchial infection with the boy's mother, Raquel Hernandez.

By TRACIE WHITE  
Sentinel staff writer

**M**INERVA CALVARIO sits in the waiting room of the Salud para la Gente medical clinic with her year-old daughter, Perla. The little girl slumps, glassy-eyed, in her mother's lap, waiting for the doctor. She has a fever and an ear infection.

For three days following the earthquake, the family slept outside in a parking lot using their pickup truck for shelter. They were without electricity for two days and still have no gas to cook with. When the weather turned bad, Perla got sick.

Victoria Perez, walks back and forth also comforting her newborn baby in the clinic's waiting room. "The baby has a cough because she's been sleeping outside," says Perez, speaking through an interpreter. Both the baby and her mother look tired.

The chairs at the clinic are filled with Watsonville residents who are feeling the stress of a community suffering the after effects of going days with poor sanitation, inadequate heating, and bad water. With hundreds of people still homeless following the massive earthquake of Oct. 17, both infectious diseases and chronic disorders, are becoming serious problems.

Salud para la Gente — translated as "health care for the people" — provided care for more than 500 people in the week follow-

**'The people have *susto* — total fear. We were not just physically shaken; we were shaken in our souls.'**

— Bonnie Gutierrez,  
*Salud Para La Gente*

ing the quake that left Watsonville shaken to its core. The center is now turning its attention to the long-term health care problems.

Bonnie Gutierrez, a member of the center's board of directors and a school nurse, said she expects to see the clinic acting in an emergency mode for six months to a year. The clinic at 10 Alexander St. was open 24-hours a day the first week following the quake; it is now open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Gutierrez said she's concerned that stress caused by the earthquake and the loss of homes will lead to an increase in domestic violence and alcohol abuse.

"Most of the bars have opened up and we're going to see some abuse," said Gutierrez. And while new problems begin to emerge in the quakes aftermath, the community's ability to respond may be limited. "Even the crisis workers are in crisis."

Initially, the center was seeing patients with serious injuries, like broken legs and concussions, said Gutierrez. Clinic workers rushed downtown a few short blocks from the center immediately following the quake. They were first to treat Elida Ortega, 44, who was hit by bricks falling from the Bake Rite Bakery on East Beach Street. She became the only fatality in Watsonville during the quake.

Jeanne Sears, a nurse at the clinic, said that during days immediately following the quake, people came to the clinic with trauma-related injuries, cuts from broken glass, sprained ankles. They also came with stress-related illnesses, such as stomachaches and headaches.

"Now we're seeing people with chronic illnesses that have become acute," like diabetics, people with hypertension who haven't been able to get medicine and children with stress-related asthma attacks, Sears said. "We're also seeing a lot of sick kids with exposure-related illnesses, coughs, earaches, diarrhea, food poisoning."

Food poisoning is common when the electricity is off for an extended period of time, said Paul Yost, a physician at the clinic. Concerned about the outbreak of any communicable diseases, Yost said the clinic is closely monitoring illnesses to keep them from spreading. He's reminding patients to wash their hands before preparing any food, to keep food refrigerated or on ice, and to find adequate sanitation whether or not they're sleeping outside.

The clinic has seen scores of people from the outdoor camps who have contracted scabies, a contagious itchy disease passed by the donated blankets, said Josefa Simkin, medical director at Salud. She's searching for a laundry facility that can help clean the blankets. Other contagious diseases like

chicken pox and strep throat, have so far been kept under control.

"Each day we see more and more people," said Yost. The center is also gathering together bilingual counselors to help people deal with stress.

"The people have *susto* — total fear," said Gutierrez. "You have to remember, we were not just physically shaken; we were shaken in our souls."

The clinic has treated people who have suffered heart attacks caused by the aftershocks and children who have begun wetting their bed at night. Gutierrez said that there are husbands who are staying up all night, dressed and ready to get their families out in the event of another quake.

Much of the large Hispanic-American community in Watsonville remembers the massive earthquake and aftershocks of the Mexico City disaster four years ago. They are afraid to seek shelter inside a building, said Gutierrez.

In an effort to reach as many people as possible, the clinic began sending three mobile units into the community Saturday. Gutierrez said the clinic sent a mobile unit out to see a pregnant woman with diabetes who had been left homeless following the quake. The woman had called the fire department because she was running out of insulin and couldn't get to town.

Another physician took a mobile unit out to see an elderly woman, also with diabetes, who was too frightened by the quake to leave her mobile home.

Dr. Trish Blair, a volunteer from Santa Teresa Community Hospital in San Jose, visited the Buena Vista labor camp Monday, after working at the clinic most of the weekend.

Using a mobile home as a roving medical clinic, she set up a table at the camp, which was quickly surrounded by women with sick children.

"We're seeing a lot of ear infections and early pneumonia," said Blair. "The little ones have diarrhea from the bad water."

Most of the agricultural workers at the camp slept outside for at least three nights following the quake because they were too frightened to go inside. Early this week they began to move back inside, said Leticia Nolasco, who lives at the camp.

"All last week we slept in the car," said Ignacio Juarez, who brought his son to see the doctor. "We couldn't roll up the window so it was cold." He was worried about his son, Ignacio Juarez Jr. who had a fever and was complaining about his ear hurting. The family has moved back home finally, but they're still worried.

"My wife is still scared," said Juarez.

Richard Miranda, health education director for Salud para la Gente, said the center has received help from all over the state since the earthquake struck. Doctors have responded from throughout the San Francisco Bay Area and from as far away as Los Angeles. Medical supplies have been donated and lab equipment.

"We've received everything we could ask for," said Yost.

The center provided free care the first week following the quake. Starting Sunday, it went back to limited billing on a sliding fee scale, but organizers emphasize that anyone needing care will receive it whether or not they can pay.