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Kona Community Hospital nursing executive Patricia Kalua yesterday prepared to enter one of the modules of a mobile medical unit set up in a parking area of the hospital.

Kona hospital cited as quake lesson

FEMA will use the facility to show how hospitals should cope with disaster

By Rod Thompson
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KEALAKEKUA, Hawaii » Kona Community Hospital will become a prime example of what a hospital should do, and perhaps should not do, to withstand a major earthquake, Federal Emergency Management Agency officials said yesterday.

FEMA was already preparing a book for nationwide distribution on how hospitals should handle disasters, including floods and high winds, but lacked an example of earthquake danger until Oct. 15, said FEMA earthquake specialist Jeffrey Lusk from Oakland, Calif.

Officials were at the hospital yesterday and are continuing

their study today.

Lusk said the hospital came through the earthquake "phenomenally," but that was a reference to the framework of the building, which suffered no damage. "Structurally, the building performed well," Lusk said.



Chief nursing executive Patricia Kalua said every room had fallen ceiling tiles. In some cases, hospital staff placed their bodies over patients to prevent them from being hit by the heavy tiles, she said.

The hospital came through with no major injuries to staff or patients. "I couldn't be happier," she said.

Lusk said the issue of falling tiles is a matter to be studied in the light of the Hawaii County building code. Neither he nor Kalua had any preliminary comment on how the hospital, and others reading the planned FEMA book, should respond to the tile problem.

The hospital was only 40 percent operational on Monday but is anticipated to return to full operations on Friday, a hospital statement said. That meant that about 13 of the 33 medical and surgical beds were available, the statement said. The obstetrics units was fully functional.

Two patients were sent to Oahu hospitals on Monday and a third was sent to Hilo Medical Center, Kalua said.

One operating room was functioning, but two others needed cleaning. All three were expected to be full operational today, the statement said.

Outpatient surgeries can start today and other surgeries will resume on Friday.

A "mobile medical unit," looking like two tents connected by a tented walkway, able to handle 20 patients, was set up Saturday to treat any triathlon participants needing medical care.

No triathletes or regular patients needed it, but Kalua said, "It was a relief to have it. We had extra capacity. You never know what's going to happen."

The tents were purchased by the private Healthcare Association of Hawaii and stored in Hilo. They were sent to Kona after the earthquake. Eventually they will probably be stored at Kona's Keahole Airport so they could be near a transportation point used by an air ambulance or Coast Guard mercy flight if needed, Kalua said.

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