

Student actors put emergency plans to the test

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Two Bruce County paramedics and a Brucelea Haven staff member assist Matt Douglas-Vail, a Georgian Bay Secondary School student playing the part of a Brucelea resident, during last Wednesday's mock disaster. The training exercise utilized high school students enrolled in the MedQUEST camp, and tested the emergency preparedness plans of Brucelea Haven, the County of Bruce, Municipality of Brockton, and local emergency responders.

Christine Brandt photo

Some convincing actors took part in a mock disaster last Wednesday at Brucelea Haven in Walkerton.

Twenty-four high school students enrolled in the annual MedQUEST Health Careers Exploration Camp played the roles of staff members, residents and family members who were in and around the long-term care home when disaster struck. The scenario, mapped out ahead of time by MedQUEST volunteers, Brucelea staff, local EMS, firefighters and county officials, had an air ambulance helicopter fly into the side of the building, resulting in four deaths and numerous injuries of varying degrees.

"They were fantastic," EMS operations manager Steve Schaus said of the students. "They kept us on our toes."

The mock disaster fulfilled the emergency preparedness mandate not just for Brucelea Haven but also for the Municipality of Brockton and the County of Bruce. Originally designed to give the MedQUEST students a first-hand look at how emergency responders handle an urgent situation, this year's mock disaster grew into a training exercise for Brucelea Haven and county staff as well.

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"I couldn't be more pleased with everyone's efforts," Brucelea administrator Eleanor MacEwen said following the exercise. "We couldn't have asked for better support in this community. How the different groups all came together on this was just phenomenal."

The mock disaster began at 10 a.m., when paramedics, OPP officers and firefighters from Walkerton and Mildmay were notified of the simulated helicopter crash. Within minutes there were several emergency responders on the scene, none of whom knew what the training exercise entailed.

MacEwen said afterwards that her staff were not warned or briefed before the disaster began, yet it took them just a few minutes to start evacuating the affected part of the building.

"Our primary goal is to care for the residents who are entrusted to our care," she said. "We made life safety our first priority, and learning our second, but both were accomplished today."

Schaus said the various injuries suffered by the mock victims, in conjunction with having patients inside and outside the home to deal with, resulted in a challenging scenario.

"This was a good learning curve for us. This really taxed our system and we'll have to make some improvements," he said, citing communication between EMS personnel and firefighters as one area that could use improvement.

Glen Wilhelm, Walkerton's acting fire chief, agreed with Schaus.

"Communication was a bit of a problem; we had some feedback with the radios but once we switched back to our own channel it worked better," he said.

"It was nice to have police, fire and ambulance working together and overall, what I saw here today was excellent."



Work crews at the former nurses' residence at the Walkerton hospital began taking the walls down in August. The windows were removed first and all infrastructure disconnected. The demolition was completed around the end of the month, making way for the new Brockton and Area Medical Clinic, which is to be started in 2009.