

# An invisible media type

It's not often one can become invisible—even more so when one is a member of the media.

But Tuesday afternoon, I was, in fact, invisible. I stood in the halls of the Bennett Health Care Centre and watched the staff struggle to evacuate residents from the place while fire raged in one corridor.

Okay, it wasn't a 'real' fire, but a mock disaster to allow the staff an opportunity to deal with the stress, assess their emergency response plans, and most of all, learn how to be ready to deal with the unknown.

And I was invited to document the event. The exercise was co-ordinated by Neil Shepherd of Shepherd Solutions. Neil is not only an expert in conducting and assessing mock disasters, but he is also a board member at the Bennett.

The exercise involved 15 Christ the King high school students (posing as residents with various health conditions) and additional Bennett residents and family members who volunteered to take part.

Some of the 'residents' had slight burns or injuries, some experienced confusion, and a few were belligerent and difficult, as they might well be in a real emergency.

The aim of the simulation was to test the staff, and allow them to evaluate how they reacted, and be able to fine tune their procedures.

"It's easy to sit around a table with a bunch of people and discuss the procedures," said Shepherd in the debriefing, "But when you are in a simulated disaster, it feels like the 'real deal' and is much easier to see where you can improve."

And more effective it was.

I watched staffers sliding 'residents' down the halls, wrapped in blankets, as they had been lifted from their beds. Sliding them on a blanket on the smooth floor is the fastest, most effective means of moving a person who is unable to walk.

In addition, the mock disaster had emergency personnel and police officers on hand to add to the realism.

They even enlisted Sheri Martincourt to pose as an obnoxious, in-your-face 'journalist' who was asking the wrong questions from the wrong people, getting in the way of the staff, and in short making a nuisance

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and hazard of herself.

Her presence was to test the staff to see how they dealt with her over-zealous questioning. (At the debriefing, I noted that in a real-life situation, her behaviour would have landed her in the backseat of a police cruiser within minutes.)

She later played the part of a frantic daughter, searching for her 'lost' mother, violently trying to get past police, staff and even Bennett Centre Administrator Mark

Ewer, to reach her 'mother' somewhere in the building.

Once all the 'residents' were safely removed from

their rooms, they gathered at the entrances where staff administered triage, the process of sorting injured people into groups based on their need for medical treatment.

In a real situation, they would then be loaded on ambulances and removed to safety.

During debriefing, Shepherd congratulated staff on a good drill with minimal problems.

Bennett Administrator Mark Ewer explained this was the first time the Bennett Centre has had an evacuation drill in five years.

"The Bennett Centre has fire drills on a monthly basis—it's a requirement of the Ministry of Health," said Ewer. "But a mock evacuation is much more effective in educating them to react in a real situation."

I agree. Although I knew what to expect by being apprised before the exercise, I could still feel the tension in the air. Staffers were flushed, some were on edge, and all had a major adrenaline rush.

But that's a good thing. After all is said and done, the Bennett Centre staff are certainly a bit wiser, the procedures will likely be tweaked a little, and one major fact remains.

The 'real' residents are all much safer.

For photos see page 9

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**Free parking locations during the games are as follows:**

- A - Halton Hills Civic Centre 1.0 km
- B - Cedarvale Park 0.8 km
- C - Memorial Arena 0.9 km
- D - Mill & Main Sts. 0.5 km
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