The process of evacuating a regional hospital prior to a pending natural disaster

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On 3 February 2011 tropical cyclone (TC) Yasi struck the coastline of north Queensland, Australia. This study explored the process of a pre-emptive evacuation of a 330-bed regional hospital prior to the cyclone. A range of health care professionals and middle management staff (n=15) were interviewed about their experience of the hospital evacuation. Patient care and safety was the overarching priority for everyone involved in the hospital evacuation, but communication issues challenged the effective management of the evacuation process. Four hierarchical levels of leadership were identified. Communication breakdowns between each level, and the lack of an evacuation plan, led to confusion about roles, responsibilities and processes, contributed to lengthy delays for patients waiting to be evacuated, and resulted in less than optimal patient care. Given the unpredictability of natural disasters, a comprehensive disaster evacuation plan focusing on communication, pre-planning and leadership, is essential for hospitals in vulnerable locations.