

# Surge Protection

*A regional hospital partnership prepares for the next big crisis*

**Jan. 29, 2008**, is a day Dr. Thomas Terndrup won't soon forget. That rush hour morning, freezing rain hit the Harrisburg area, causing traffic accidents throughout the region. As professor and chair for the Department of Emergency Medicine at the Penn State College of Medicine in Hershey, Terndrup witnessed a significant surge in accident victims come through the emergency room doors. The ER, which typically sees around 10 people in an hour at that time of day, treated 85 injured commuters over the course of 90 minutes. By the end of that morning, 274 injured people had checked into regional hospital ERs. It was then that Terndrup confirmed just how important his new initiative would be.

Formed during the fall of 2007, the Healthcare Facilities Partnership of South Central Pennsylvania aims to improve regional communication, interaction and cooperation for better emergency preparedness in the region during a public health crisis. The partnership is comprised of 17 hospitals in eight counties (Adams, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Lancaster, Lebanon, Perry and York) and is funded with a \$2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

"In these times of increased uncertainty, emergency preparedness



*Partners participate in a pandemic influenza outbreak simulation.*

is vitally important. Our goal is to improve surge capacity and enhance community and hospital preparedness for public health emergencies," said Terndrup. "In so doing, the partnership would increase health care staff mobilizing to support hospitals facing surge demands." The procedures to achieve this include mock drills, systematic activation enhancements and better coordination between response entities, and updated mutual aid agreements between partner hospitals, among others.

## **From Three Mile Island to New Concerns**

South central Pennsylvania is no stranger to public health emergencies.

On March 28, 1979, human and mechanical errors led to the partial meltdown of a reactor core at the nearby Three Mile Island (TMI) nuclear power plant, resulting in small discharges of radioactivity.

Today's potential public health scenarios are no less challenging—from a lethal outbreak of pandemic influenza to terrorists attacking the remaining TMI reactor and unleashing a radioactive cloud, a mere 13 miles from the State Capitol.

"Surge capacity is critical," said partnership member Frank Hess, emergency management coordinator for PinnacleHealth System. "We were very pleased that [Penn State] Hershey was willing to take the lead."