

Hundreds Of Calif. Hospitals At Risk Of Collapse

Randy Paige, KCAL.com (Los Angeles television), 5-25-10

Los Angeles - Experts have told us it's only a matter of time until a major earthquake rocks southern California.

In an exclusive CBS 2 news investigation, Randy Paige shows us why some of our southern California hospitals may be the last place you want to be during a quake.

We begin in Sylmar, 39 years ago.

It struck before sunrise at 6:01 a.m. Feb. 9, 1971. Sixty five people died in the magnitude 6.6 earthquake. Most of the deaths came when two big hospitals collapsed.

At Olive View hospital, nurse Jim Hazard was on the second floor of psychiatric wing when the first floor disappeared beneath him.

"I felt the sensation of falling like in a fast elevator," he said.

Three people died in Olive View.

"In the ICUs, the people who died were on ventilators," he said.

At the Veterans Hospital, the casualties were much worse. By the time the last survivor was pulled from the mountains of hospital rubble, 45 people were dead.

"It's something that never leaves you," Hazard said.

Hazard looks at this devastation and sees lives that were lost. Earthquake experts look at the rubble and see how lives could be saved.

"The lesson from the 1971 San Fernando earthquake is that there are types of buildings that were commonly built in the 50s and 60s that perform very badly in earthquakes," said USGS Seismologist Lucy Jones.

"It's the collapse of SPC-1 buildings that are going to give us our largest number of casualties when the earthquake actually happens," she said.

She's speaking of SPC-1, a building classification with an ominous meaning.

These are buildings "that are considered hazardous and at risk of collapse or significant loss of life in the event of an earthquake."

The state outlawed their construction in the wake of the devastating San Fernando quake but existing buildings were allowed to stand.

Thirty nine years have now passed since we learned that painful lesson – that hospitals can become tombs if they are not constructed properly.

So what has been done about it? We wanted to find out. So we combed through hundreds of pages of documents, researched laws and building codes and you'll be surprised at what we found.

Case in point: Glendale Memorial Hospital.

Originally built in the 1940s, state experts tell us that's made out of non-ductile concrete, like the Veterans Hospital that collapsed nearly forty years ago.

Then there's Ventura County Medical Center. It, too, is constructed with non-ductile concrete.

And this is just the beginning.

Other hospitals considered to be at risk for collapse or significant loss of life include: Memorial Hospital in Gardena, Centinela Hospital in Inglewood, Alhambra Hospital and Citrus Valley Medical Center in Covina.

In fact, there are so many hospitals on the list there are too many for us to show you one by one.

Most at risk hospitals are sitting on top of the most severe earthquake faults in the state. And what's the likelihood of a big quake?

"The chance that we get one large enough to bring down an SPC-1 building near the event is essentially certain in our lifetimes," Jones said.

How can we be in this predicament more than 39 years after the lessons learned from the San Fernando quake?

The State legislature passed a law back in the mid-90s requiring all hospitals to retrofit or rebuild by 2008. But many hospitals said they just couldn't afford it and said 'give us an extension or we'll simply close our doors for good.'

Hospitals now have until 2013 and beyond.

"Money is the problem here," said Jim Lott with the Hospital Association of Southern California.

"There are many hospitals that don't have the ability to do it now, didn't have the ability to do it in the last 14 years and probably won't have the ability in the coming 10 years," he said.

Randy Paige: "Don't you owe it to these people, these patients, to at least give them a building that won't

collapse on them?"

Jim Lott: "Now first of all, you're making the assumption that these hospitals are dangerous as they stand right now...we have earthquakes everyday in Los Angeles. Hospitals are not falling down."

"I think we need an immediate investigation by the attorney general," said Consumer Watchdog Jamie Court.

He keeps an eye on the finances of the healthcare industry.

"They're clearly turning a profit. You look at their annual funds – a six percent profit in the billions of dollars every year. It means you got to be able to put hundreds of millions of dollars away for retrofitting," Court said.

Even many nurses who work in these hospitals have no idea about the seismic danger.

Randy Paige: "Is this the healthcare industry's best kept secret?"

Jamie Court: "I think it's the healthcare industry's best kept nightmare."

For survivors like Jim Hazard who lived through the San Fernando earthquake, it's personal.

"It's ludicrous. It's ludicrous. Where are the people going to go that are injured?"