

Tales from the Hurricane

Edited by Norman M. Goldfarb

Editor's Note: The following tales from members of the clinical research community have been extracted and edited for your reading convenience in the comfort of your home. If you are unable to help in any other way, say a prayer...

_____ tried to go from Memphis to Slidell, LA to get things from his house and survey the damage, but realized on the way that there is no gas anywhere down there. Faced with that, he drove BACK to Memphis, spent the day hunting for gas cans, found 5, and will head back with extra fuel at 2 a.m. tomorrow to try it again. Once back, he will drop off family in Peoria and Michigan, and then head to Texas with his wife and daughter.

_____ is tired and confused, and helping everyone out in the shelter – our Florence Nightingale with flair. She said the people down there are UNBELIEVABLE, doing everything they can to feed everyone and help them in every way. Unfortunately, three more have died – it has been a traumatic experience for all. Still, humor can be found even in dire circumstances. Several women remarked, "Sure am glad they brought us Mardi Gras beads because we left all of our jewelry at home!" One woman said, "I know something must be terribly wrong, because they keep on talking about New Orleans on the news and it does not sound good – please bring me a rosary!" Soon, a whole group of them were chanting for their rosaries. I think they found them some, even though that area is heavily Baptist and this is a pretty much all-Catholic group in the shelter. The parish priest is in heaven with so many new Catholics in town!

I was contacted today here in Atlanta by a patient who was on a research protocol in New Orleans when the storm hit. He is in Memphis with family. The University of Tennessee contacted me because we participate in the same study. The U of T was willing to treat, as are we. The sponsor for the study gave us an open door to do whatever we needed to treat the patient, as well as help with other cost items like living expenses, transportation, etc. It was not a matter of whether the study data could be used, as treatment was already late and safety data was missing. It was the idea that if it gave the patient peace of mind to receive study treatment, we would work it out.

I fully understand the fears about how the homeless and out-of-work people from Louisiana and Mississippi will affect the individual cities that are helping in this crisis. We have the same fears here in Shreveport. All 13 of our coordinators worked the shelters yesterday and then came to work to do their regular jobs. We will continue to do so for weeks to come. All of our sponsors have been very understanding. Our hospital is taking in patients daily. We have been told that our nurse research coordinators may be pulled to staff the hospital and will have to "do research" in their spare time.

This is a crisis that will reshape the South forever. We will not have the same ole peaceful South for a long time. I locked the barn doors on my farm last night for the first time since I moved here a year ago. I fear the desperation which all these displaced casualties of nature and an unprepared government are feeling. Desperate people will do anything to care for their families. I have to admit I would loot, steal and maybe worse to ensure the survival of my family if I was placed in this same situation. Now I must protect my family and home from those trying to survive. This is not a good feeling and I fear I will not feel good for years to come as the South overcomes the worst crisis since the civil war.

I am located at Wilford Hall Medical Center at Lackland AFB in San Antonio TX. We evacuated the Kessler AFB (Louisiana) patients here two days ago. Now that the Astrodome is full, we are the next city who will be receiving "refugees". They were supposed to go to Kelly AFB but the local news says Kelly can only house something like 4,500, which is not enough, and not in an air-conditioned building. I just heard on the news they are going to use an empty Toyota office building instead. The rumor in the hospital this morning is that we are receiving 200 more patients tonight. I have to admit, my staff is looking at each other asking what we should do. I wonder what our city will be like the next few months. San Antonio can't handle our homeless population as it is. The future is uncertain for these folks.

Our research site in New Orleans has 6 employees. We are their only means of financial support. I am trying to set up an office here in St. Louis, but our employees do not have the financial means to travel here. When/if they get here, they will need financial support for housing, etc. I am trying to wire money to their accounts but all of the phone lines are busy so I am issuing Western Union checks to them instead. Each of them makes about \$2,000 per month. One employee has lost everything. She no longer has a home to go back to, and only the clothes on her back. She is on hypertensive meds and has been in a hypertensive crisis since she left the city.

We lived not far from the 17th street canal in New Orleans. We knew from the news reports that our neighborhood was flooded – and we realized that our one-story house almost certainly suffered the same fate. However, there is still the urge to know about our particular house – and there is a hope (however irrational) that somehow our house was spared. Well, we spotted our house in the aerial photos, and we saw the floodwaters and even saw that our neighbor's oak tree had fallen onto our roof. There was a sadness and amazement as we viewed the destruction, but there was also a relief in knowing for sure what the storm did to our house. The photos ended our speculation – and pushed us to move ahead with things. There is a comfort in certainty – and, though it may seem strange, the photos brought us that comfort.

I am OK. I am living in a friend's house. Before I was rescued from the storm, I stayed at a nursing home with my mother and 79 other elderly. Been through it baby. But now things are calming down.

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