

Hurricane Katrina Journal Highlights

Gregory S. Henderson, MD, PhD, FCAP, the only doctor at the New Orleans Convention Center immediately following the devastating wrath of 2005's hurricane Katrina, chronicled the events in a diary. Below are highlights from that very personal account.

Saturday, August 27, 2005

I had an overwhelming intuition that what was about to hit this city that had been my home and the home of 4 of my previous generations, would probably erase her from the map forever.

Monday, August 29, 2005

I awoke at 6:15 AM - the time the power went out. I looked out the window and the howling witch Katrina was definitely upon us.

About 4PM the guests were allowed to return to their rooms. True to New Orleans form, by 6 PM someone had set up a stand selling cold draft beer for \$1 on Bourbon Street.

Tuesday, August 30, 2005

When dawn broke, it was clear that everything was now completely different. I looked out of my window to realize that the hotel was surrounded by 3-5 feet of water, and there was water filling most of Canal Street.

Wednesday, August 31, 2005

Police Captain John Bryson, who had become the de facto man in charge, told me I was the only doctor that he had seen, and that Tulane, LSU and Charity Hospital were taking on water and the patients and doctors were stranded. He asked me if I would stay and take care of the several hundred police officers who had set up camp at the Sheraton. I told him I would, but as I answered, I felt the chilling fear that it was now me and only me who had to run the show. I quietly prayed that I would miraculously remember everything I learned thirteen years prior as a medical student in the Vanderbilt University Hospital ER during my 3-month trauma surgery rotation. I prayed even harder that I wouldn't need to use anything that I remembered.

By evening we were ready for business. Bryson announced to all of the force that we had a doctor and a clinic now in the lobby bar, and to please see me with any medical problems. Immediately I was transformed from a subspecialist in pathology to a family practice/internal medicine/psychiatrist/ and ER physician. I saw everything from generalized anxiety disorders (not unexpected as most of the police had lost homes and some had lost family members and yet still were on the job). I dealt with quite a bit of hypertension and diabetes. It seemed to me as if the majority of the NOPD is hypertensive and type II diabetic. I took a lot of blood pressures, took a lot of pulses (I didn't yet have a stethoscope), and refilled a lot of beta-blocker, calcium channel blocker and diuretic prescriptions. I gave out a lot of Cipro. I cleaned and dressed a lot of superficial wounds. I gave a lot of insulin shots – but since I had forgotten the rubbing alcohol, I had to use Wild Turkey to

sterilize skin sites before all my injections. There were no complaints.

Thursday, September 1, 2005

Clinic lasted all night – it took that long to get all the histories and physicals done and finish organizing my clinic. I ran another morning clinic for the police officers coming off of evening duty, this time dealing with more superficial minor lacerations, and what seemed to be increasingly common rashes in those exposed to the water. Some of the rashes became so severe that some of the cops had to walk around in their underwear because it was so painful. It appeared to be some severe contact dermatitis from exposure to toxins in the water.

(Later Captain John Bryson and I drove to the Convention Center.) As we turned on to the wide boulevard that runs in front of the Ernest Morial Convention Center, it seemed as if we were crossing the border into a Third World Nation. Thousands of people were collected on the boulevard in front of the convention center. There were the infants, adults, elderly, and lines of the wheelchair bound. There were many very old and very young lying on sheets and blankets on the median (or neutral ground as we call it here in New Orleans). There were screaming men, women and children and dazed, quiet and confused men, women and children. Most were African-American, but many were white. It was as if the entire city had vomited up its citizens and the convention center was the vomit trough. People saw that I was dressed in green scrubs from Ochsner Hospital and started banging on the windows saying, "Help us doc!" Many were in tears. I wanted to get out of the vehicle and

help these people, but Bryson was minimally armed. He wouldn't let me out, but promised that as soon as we got back to the Sheraton he would send me back with an armed police escort to start trying to do something for these people.

He kept his promise, and he sent me out with Officer Mark Mornay – one of the finest and bravest men I have ever had the pleasure to know in my life. When Mornay took me back to the Convention Center and saw what I saw – he too took it as his personal mission to help these people in any and every way he could. We found quickly that a physician in scrubs with a stethoscope and a kind, but forceful, police officer were immediately welcomed into the crowd. The problem was how to deal with all the people – estimates are that by then there were 15,000 people there – I later found out that the number was closer to 30,000.

As soon as I would briefly hear one person's crisis, I was grabbed for another – there was simply no way to logically triage it all. I ended up spending most of the afternoon with Mornay just making my way through the crowd dealing with one person after another. Many dehydrated infants and mothers – all I could do was get them water bottles, tell them to get out of the sun (although that was little remedy as everywhere you went it was 100 degrees) and keep drinking. Hundreds of elderly confined to wheelchairs – also dehydrated, many with large plastic bags of empty medication bottles asking for refills (of which I had none). One man led me to his aunt, an elderly, diabetic wheelchair-bound woman, who told me that she thought she had something wrong with her legs. I lifted her long housecoat to reveal multiple bilateral deep skin and soft tissue

ulcerations on her tibias and feet, and a few gangrenous toes. I told her that I couldn't do anything for her right now but I would get help as fast as I could. She said, "That's ok honey, I'm old, they don't hurt that bad, and there are some sick babies here – you go worry about them."

I saw every manifestation of both acute, but mainly chronic untreated disease that a physician can see, and realized in stark cold reality just how much we are a nation of chronic disease. And, I was seeing first hand what happens when the medical infrastructure is pulled out from under our nation of the chronically ill – not unlike the old image of pulling the tablecloth from under a very expensively laid banquet table. I saw thousands of diabetics, all of whom had no insulin or oral hypoglycemics. There were renal failure patients that had not been dialyzed for days, and were clearly not being hydrated. I saw the thousands upon thousands of hypertensive patients – essentially all of whom did not have their medicines, and were thus at risk for rebound severe hypertension. I saw heroin addicts looking for a methadone clinic. And in the most devastating and haunting memory of all, I saw rows and rows of people from the children to the elderly who were wheelchair bound, because of cerebral palsy, severe congenital defects, amputation, and strokes lined up in rows, many sitting in their adult diapers for days, because there were simply no fresh diapers to change them.

I could go on and on, as I dig deeper and deeper into my memory over that first day at the convention center, but the stories would be ceaseless repetitions of the same, often futile, attempts to take care of people with a stethoscope, my hands and my words.

Friday, September 2, 2005

After treating God knows how many more officers and support staff and hotel employees, I laid down for an hour to catch the first sleep I had since Sunday.

But despite my often futile efforts, I was reminded in a deeply moving way of the responsibility and power with which one is blessed when fortunate enough to earn the title of Doctor. With the only tools I had, my presence, my ears to listen and my hands to touch, I found that at times I could provide some small measure of healing, and more often could provide much more comfort. Some people just wanted to come up and have me hug them while they cried on me, cried like souls begging to get out of hell and hoping I was the one that would free them. But I was condemned to it with them.