The Eye of Hurricane Katrina: One AAMA Member's Story

Lt Col Barbara J. Henning CAAMA, USAF, MSC

Associate Administrator
Keesler Medical Center
Keesler Air Force Base
Biloxi, MS

Hurricane Katrina was described by one man as "one day of bad weather that changed everything." The Category 4 (later determined to be a high-end Category 3) hurricane made landfall just west of Biloxi, Miss., Monday, Aug. 29, 2005, causing a storm surge of up to 35 feet. This destroyed much of the coastline, and severely damaged the three big Gulf Coast industries: fishing, casinos and Keesler Air Force Base.

I'm the associate administrator for Keesler Medical Center at Keesler AFB in Biloxi. I was evacuated during the hurricane, but wish to share the destruction and rebuilding of Biloxi, Keesler AFB and primarily the medical center.

Several feet of water flooded Keesler AFB, causing severe damage to major buildings, making 800 of the 1,800 family housing units uninhabitable and inundating the medical center's basement with up to four feet of water. The medical center was being used as an evacuation shelter for approximately 1,300 patients, medical personnel and their families. As the water came in, it flooded the basement, causing all primary and backup electrical power to fail. This left the hospital full of people and without power or communication.

As water rose in the basement, staff rushed to the medical records section and rescued most of the 100,000 irreplaceable records housed there. During the storm, the hospital staff delivered two babies using light from hand-held flashlights. The staff also successfully kept three seriously-ill patients alive with hand-ventilation until base civil engineers braved the storm's fury to deliver and connect a small portable generator. Once the storm passed, students from Keesler helped clear the runway so that patients from the hospital could be evacuated. Staff had to hand-carry patients down the hospital's stairs in the dark, as the elevators were also destroyed by the flood. In total, 70 Keesler patients were evacuated.

Once it was deemed safe for people to return, an assessment of the hospital was completed. Besides the electrical power, generator power and elevators; the fire alarm and suppression system and medical gasses were also damaged. In addition, several sink holes surrounded the building, and mold was growing everywhere due to the high humidity in the building. Water rose 4 feet in the basement, destroying the dining facility, central sterile supply, a linear accelerator, mammography suite, MRI suite, the logistics warehouse and several clinics.

In spite of the medical center effectively being closed, medical care continued during this time. On Sept 2, Keesler medics set up an Expeditionary Medical Support hospital package (tents and equipment used during deployment to provide basic medical care with limited surgery and beds), in a parking lot near the hospital. They treated 30-50 patients a day, mainly from hurricane recovery-related injuries.

The EMEDS facility was taken down just before Hurricane Rita struck on Sept. 24 due to the potential winds from the storm. The first aid station moved to the clinical research laboratory building about one block west of the hospital.

As staff, family members and retired families returned to the area, the demand for primary care increased. As a result, primary care services were established in one half of the base dental clinic, a relatively unscathed building about two blocks west of the main hospital. Providers in family practice, internal medicine, pediatrics and flight medicine began seeing Tricare Prime-enrolled patients. In addition, mental health services, as well as limited lab, pharmacy, x-ray and immunizations stood up. All the care was provided in dental suites using dental chairs.

By December, things were starting to come together. The sink holes around the hospital were filled and the mold in the building fumigated. The basement was gutted with half the dry wall removed. The base fire marshal agreed that daytime-only medical care could be provided on the first floor of the hospital, but with strict rules. Power was still not on everywhere and the building was subject to frequent power outages. Backup power was also not restored. Staff was allowed to move back in, but due to the increase risk of fire, all staff were briefed about fire safety instructions and areas of evacuation. Safe areas for patients also were established. We gave all employees a small flashlight to wear on their uniform, which they could use in case power was lost. We also installed emergency lighting in the halls. Finally we started fire watch patrols to check the entire building every hour, 24/7, for any sign of a fire.

Of course, Katrina affected the community as well. Thirty percent of the hospital staff lost all or a much of their homes and belongings, while many others were displaced awaiting repairs. In general, there was a lack of housing and schools and services had not resumed. Everywhere there were downed trees, houses gutted, piles of debris and blue roofs, but most disturbing is what you don't see. Homes and business – even most of some towns – were completely obliterated, just swept away. Five months after Katrina, people still get lost driving around because many landmarks are gone. My apartment was intact, but I didn't get power until late October. A good friend has everything her and her family own in the back of a Volkswagen.

Katrina also left emotional scars. Initially, most of us worked long hours and with almost a war mentality. There were so many issues and problems to work; we worked late into the evening and on weekends. Now, almost half a year since the storm, things still are not normal, but getting better. The fishing industry and casinos are coming back. The base's mission is training and the students are returning. Every day we are closer to resuming inpatient care.

The saying in this area post-Katrinia is, "We will come back, but even stronger." Each of us is coming back. And someday in the not-to-distant future, our hospital, our base and our community will be back to normal – and better!