

On the Front Lines of Disaster

By Robin Suits

While thousands of people were evacuating the Gulf Coast to escape Hurricane Katrina, two members of the Department of Emergency Medicine were deliberately heading into the eye of the storm. Mark Gebhart, M.D., assistant professor, and Scott Fitzsimmons, senior EMS technologist, were among the first responders to this national tragedy.

Dr. Gebhart serves as a medical team manager for Ohio Task Force One, an Urban Search and Rescue team under the Federal Emergency Management Agency. He was the only physician among the 35 task force members and four rescue dogs deployed to Meridian Naval Air Station on Saturday, August 27. Once they arrived in Gulfport, Mississippi, around 6 p.m. Sunday, the team immediately went into “blitz” mode, working 36 hours without rest. They then joined a large search and rescue community at a destroyed water park near Interstate 10. “When we arrived, the water was still knee deep and the ground was covered with thick Mississippi mud,” he says.

“The days were about 20 hours each, beginning at 0:55 with sick call for the team. We continued searching for eight days, punctuated by an occasional live rescue, but much more often by fatalities.” The team searched 2,500 structures, rescued two people, and provided care for dozens of others.

“The poor were hit hard. Most couldn’t evacuate. The elderly and children were also hit hard.” He recalls seeing “people with dementia, wandering around dark streets at night; children crying alone in the streets; homes destroyed. That’s what we were greeted by.”

“The days were long, but it was rewarding. That’s truly what we train to do. This experience was the most profoundly moving experience of my medical career,” he says.

Scott Fitzsimmons served with the Ohio 5 Disaster Medical Assistance Team (DMAT), which was activated on the evening of August 27. After waiting out the storm in Memphis, his team moved on to Mississippi, where they set up a medical and command tent next to the Biloxi Regional Medical Center.

There was a tremendous amount of damage in Biloxi; nearly every structure in Katrina’s path within a half mile of the gulf shore was leveled. When we first pulled into Biloxi, a mere 36 hours after the hurricane, it looked like a bomb had gone off,” he says.

“The most touching thing that I walked away with was how the human spirit can triumph over adversity. We had people who had lost everything, and the only thing they had left was the clothes on their backs—and many of those were given to them. After we treated them, they would shake our hands, or hugs us, then thank us for what we had done for them. I don’t care who you are, that is a very moving experience.”

DMAT teams operate mobile emergency rooms, providing triage and stabilization for patients. During their 12-day Katrina deployment, the Ohio team treated more than 1,800 patients. The National Disaster Medical System (NDMS), under which DMAT teams operate, is part of the newly formed Department of Homeland Security, Directorate of Emergency Preparedness & Response.

“I don’t think that many understand, even in the medical field, that disasters on this level are complex humanitarian crises and need a tremendous amount of medical help to avoid the public health disaster after the disaster.”

Mr. Fitzsimmons joined the Department of Emergency Medicine a few months back to take on the role of first responder program manager for the department’s new Homeland Emergency Learning and Preparedness (HELP) Center, a community-wide effort to better prepare the Greater Miami Valley for large scale emergencies, such as weather disasters, terrorist attacks or hazmat situations.

The HELP Center offers disaster preparedness training to emergency responders, including law enforcement agencies, fire departments, hazardous materials technicians, bomb squads, public health service departments, emergency medical service technicians, and other emergency management personnel. Organizers hope to serve emergency personnel throughout FEMA Region 5, which covers Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, and Ohio. Its mission is “to educate, prepare, and train all healthcare providers in the skills and fundamentals of emergency management, mass casualty care, and disaster response to all hazards including acts of nuclear, chemical, and biological terrorism,” according to Dr. Gebhart.

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