

Nearly 6,000 Gulf Coast Physicians Are Displaced

Temporary positions can provide short-term stability to physicians whose practices are underwater.

BY JENNIFER LUBELL
Associate Editor, Practice Trends

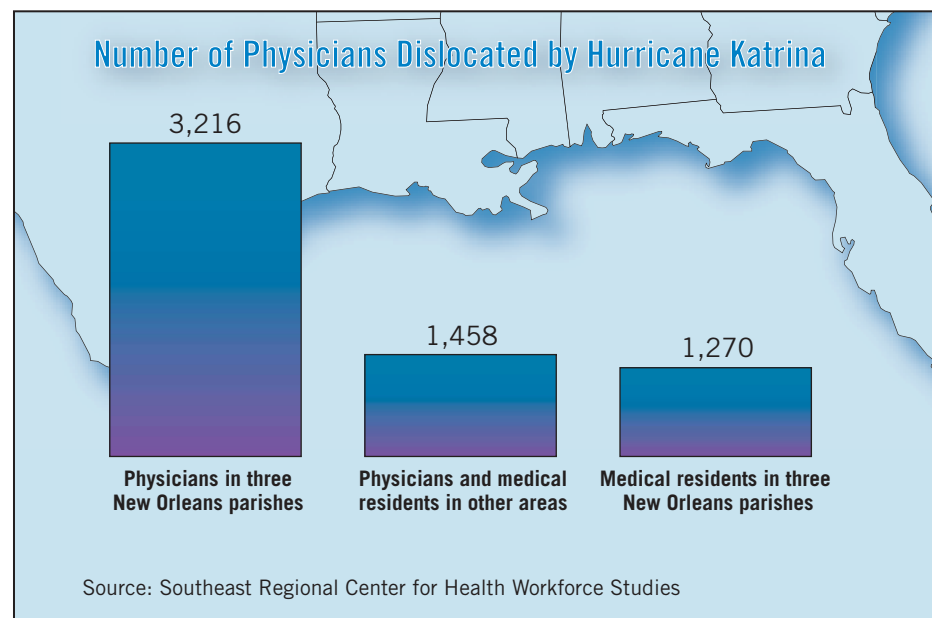
Hurricane Katrina and flooding in New Orleans may have dislocated up to 5,944 active, patient-care physicians, the largest single displacement of doctors in U.S. history, according to estimates from a recent study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

It's expected that Hurricane Rita may boost the total to an unknown degree, according to the as-yet-unpublished study.

Approximately 6,000 "physicians doing

primarily patient care in the 10 counties and parishes in Louisiana and Mississippi have been directly affected by Katrina flooding," said the study's author Thomas C. Ricketts III, M.D., deputy director for policy analysis at the university's Cecil G. Sheps Center for Health Services Research.

Of the physicians in the Katrina flood-affected areas, which included six Louisiana and four Mississippi counties or parishes, most doctors—2,952—were specialists, with 1,292 in primary care and 272 in ob.gyn. practice.



Data for the analysis were drawn from the American Medical Association's master file of physicians for the month of March and FEMA-posted information, as well as data from the American Association of Medical Colleges, Tulane University and Louisiana State University medical schools, the Texas Board of Medicine, and the state of Louisiana.

In an interview, Dr. Ricketts said most of the calls he's gotten to date have either been from physician recruiters or from practices in various parts of the country, asking for names of physicians who need a job.

Locum tenens, or temporary positions, have been an option for many of these physicians, according to Phil Miller, a spokesman for Merritt, Hawkins & Associates, a physician search firm based in Irving, Tex. "We're working with physicians who don't have a site of service right now because their clinic's been damaged or underwater, and they don't have any patients." In the meantime, these physicians still need income, and the locum tenens option offers them financial backing until they return to their practices, although "they're not sure whether they'll have a practice" anymore, he said.

Staff Care Inc., the locum tenens agency of the Merritt, Hawkins group, has been placing physicians all over the country—in Texas, Oklahoma, the Carolinas, and Florida—Trey Davis, executive vice president for the agency, said in an interview. Hospitals and state licensing boards have facilitated this effort by making some ex-

ceptions to normal guidelines to process state licensing and hospitals privileges, he said.

"We had a physician who contacted us a couple of days after Katrina hit. He flew his small, private plane to a location in Oklahoma and did a face-to-face interview with a government facility. Within 4 days, we pushed his privileges through, and he was seeing patients in less than a week."

Not every physician is looking to reestablish a practice or begin a new one, Dr. Ricketts pointed out. Some will decide to retire instead. "We don't know what this is going to mean to health care. We've never had to deal with something like this before."

Mr. Davis said his agency has been receiving numerous calls for physicians to extend their locum tenens job contracts for as long as 6 months. ■

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Web Site Provides Katrina Evacuee Drug, Treatment Data to Doctors

BY MARY ELLEN SCHNEIDER
Senior Writer

A broad coalition of public and private Web site on which physicians and pharmacists can access medication histories for patients who were evacuated from their homes in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

The Web site—www.KatrinaHealth.org—can be accessed from any location around the country by authorized physicians and pharmacists who are treating evacuees.

The effort is aimed at providing timely information to help physicians renew prescriptions, prescribe new medications, and coordinate care for the hundreds of thousands of people who have been displaced by Hurricane Katrina—many with chronic health conditions.

"With access to [these records] physicians I think can begin to piece together medical histories and avoid drug interactions and renew prescriptions that are vital to these patients' health," J. Edward Hill, M.D., president of the American Medical Association said during a telephone briefing to announce the launch of KatrinaHealth.org.

Dr. Hill, who is a family physician in Tupelo, Miss., had been working on the

front lines of this disaster in a makeshift clinic in the days following the hurricane. That work made him aware of just how much health care information was missing on these patients, he said.

And the information only becomes more critical as patients are scattered across the country, far from their homes and regular doctor, he said.

The network of prescription data was initially tested at seven shelters in the Gulf Coast region. In late September, the information was made available nationwide.

The effort, which has been facilitated by the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of the National Coordinator for Health Information Technology, also includes more than 150 organizations that helped to plan, test, and launch the site.

The information in the network comes from electronic databases from commercial pharmacies, government health insurance programs, private insurers, and pharmacy benefits managers in states affected by the storm.

At press time, the network contained

more than 1 million patient records representing more than 7 million prescriptions, according to Kevin Hutchinson, president and CEO of SureScripts, an electronic prescribing service provider.

On the Web site, physicians are able to obtain information about a patient's allergies; view a patient's prescription history as well as drug interaction and therapeutic duplication reports; and query a

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DR. HILL

every physician before they are allowed to use the site.

Physicians who want access to the site can contact AMA's 24-hour Unified Service Center at 800-262-3211 to obtain a username and password.

But the sponsors of the site also caution physicians not to rely too heavily on the information. They warn that the data may have errors of duplication or omission because it has been collected from multiple sources.

For privacy and security reasons, the site does not include information relating to some classes of drugs approved or commonly used to treat mental illness, chemical dependency, or HIV/AIDS.

And not all evacuees' information is available on the site though the information is being added on a rolling basis.

The KatrinaHealth.org effort could also provide some lessons for the overall effort to increase the adoption of health information technology, said David J. Brailer, M.D., the National Coordinator of Health Information Technology for HHS. He added, however, that the site itself is not intended for long-term use.

With regard to patients who were relocated as a result of hurricane Rita, at press time, his office was in discussions with local officials about whether they might want to utilize the site.

Dr. Brailer said that his office will perform an afteraction analysis of the site to see what had worked, what had not worked, and what could be learned from the effort.

"[Hurricane Katrina] showed us an urgent need where health information can play a role, where among all the other aspects of both the disaster and the recovery, health information has a place that can mean a real difference in people's lives," Dr. Brailer said. ■

