

Storm-Displaced Doctors Strive to Stay in Practice

BY JENNIFER LUBELL
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In the wake of the severe hurricane season on the Gulf Coast, thousands of displaced physicians are looking for ways to keep practicing medicine.

For some, this means relocating to another part of the country or holding down a temporary job in the hopes they'll someday reclaim their practice from flood-ravaged areas and regroup with their patients.

Family physician Kim Edward LeBlanc, M.D., who heads the department of family medicine at the Louisiana State University in New Orleans, said his entire department was displaced after Hurricane Katrina.

"The department had 10,000-15,000 patients, if not more," he said in an interview.

Dr. LeBlanc has since relocated to his brother's home in Baton Rouge, where he plans to establish a private clinic for his patients. In the meantime, he and his department have been busy setting up other clinics in the neighboring cities of Lafayette, Lake Charles, and Kenner. The goal is to resume some functionality and start seeing patients again, to continue the training of residents and students, and to

help the evacuees, he commented.

Residents have been sent to a variety of areas to help out, including Angola (La.) Prison, and a small hospital called Lallie Kamp, which is part of the state's charity system and has a lot of evacuees, he said.

"I've little hope that it will ever be the same again," said internist/infectious disease specialist Michael Hill, M.D., whose group practice has disintegrated since the hurricanes.

Of the 26 physicians who made up the multispecialty practice in various locations around New Orleans, "only 6 or 7 are going to be returning to the area," Dr. Hill said in an interview. "Most are going to be relocating to other states, while others are in Shreveport, Baton Rouge, or Lafayette. We've just dispersed around the state in areas not affected by the hurricane."

David D. Teuscher, M.D., an orthopedic surgeon who works at several hospitals in Beaumont, Tex., reported at press time that the area was uninhabitable in the aftermath of Hurricane Rita. The city is operating at limited capacity, he said in an interview. "There's no potable water. Everything's operating on generators, and the National Guard isn't permitting anyone to come in. Physicians and families

have fled these regions and have gone to live with family in other parts of the state and the country."

At press time, he was communicating with his staff through a daily conference call and said he hoped to restart operations at the Beaumont hospitals by early October.

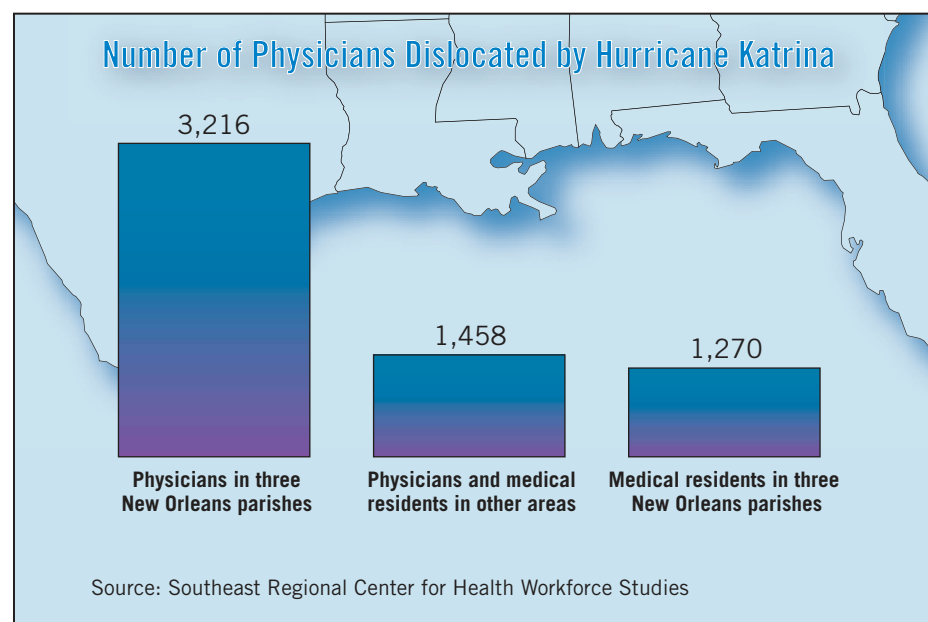
Nancy G. Michaelis, M.D., an internist from Chalmette, La., obtained a temporary license to practice in Virginia. Overall, she's had three job offers, but in an interview said she's "desperately trying to get back to New Orleans."

For now, it looks like she'll be practicing

in Virginia for quite some time.

"My house survived quite well ... [but] St. Bernard Parish was completely destroyed. The two hospitals that I went to, Chalmette Medical Center in St. Bernard and Pendleton Memorial Methodist Hospital in East New Orleans, are not operational anymore. Furthermore, the population I used to see is not there anymore."

Many physicians like Dr. Michaelis thought they'd practice at a temporary location then come back to New Orleans, "but that's less likely to happen as time goes on," Dr. Hill said. ■



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6,000 Gulf Coast Physicians Displaced

A recent study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill estimates that 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.

Hurricane Rita may boost the total to an unknown degree, according to the as-yet-unpublished study.

About 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.

The data 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 re-

cruiters 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 under water, 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.

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 exceptions to the normal guidelines to process state licensing and hospital 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."