

FIVE DAYS AT MEMORIAL

Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital

By Sheri Fink

Overview

Hurricane Katrina took 1,800 lives, displaced 400,000 people, and caused over \$1 billion in damages when it ripped through the Gulf Coast in 2005. This book chronicles the devastating effects of Katrina on Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans. With limited supplies and electricity, some doctors resort to injecting patients with lethal sedatives. After the hospital is evacuated, a lengthy and controversial investigation ensues to determine whether the doctors were justified in euthanizing patients, raising important questions about medical ethics and human rights.

Plot

Part One: When Hurricane Katrina hits New Orleans in August 2005, Memorial Medical Center is largely unprepared. Hundreds of patients and dozens of doctors are stranded in the hospital as waters rise around and within the building. With no electricity, little food, limited contact with the world outside, and an inadequate emergency preparedness plan, doctors are faced with life-altering decisions about which patients to treat and which to evacuate. As conditions deteriorate within the five days between the hurricane and the final evacuation, some doctors are seen injecting the sickest and eldest patients with deadly amounts of sedatives, posing the ultimate ethical question: is involuntary euthanasia ever justifiable?

Part Two: After all are evacuated from Memorial, many reflect on what happened during those five days and feel that the doctors who fatally injected the sickest and eldest acted in violation of both law and medical ethics. A lengthy investigation ensues, ultimately concluding that the doctors did not violate the law. Whether they violated medical ethics, however, remains up for interpretation. The book concludes with an examination of how emergency preparedness in hospitals has been altered as a result of what happened at Memorial, with focus on how hospitals in New York reacted when placed in similarly dire circumstances after Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

Main Characters

- **Dr. Anna Pou:** Doctor who decides to inject patients unlikely to survive to be evacuated with a fatal combination of sedatives and becomes the focus of post-Katrina lawsuits against Memorial
- **Lori Budo and Cheri Landry:** Nurses who assist Dr. Pou in administering fatal injections to the sickest and eldest at Memorial
- **Susan Mulderick:** Incident Commander at Memorial during Hurricane Katrina; her leadership (or lack thereof) influences much of the chaos that ensues in the hospital
- **Emmett Everett, Alice Hutzler, Wilda McManus, Rose Savoie:** Patients at Memorial whose deaths were called into question after the evacuations
- **Virginia Rider and Butch Schafer:** Lead state investigators in the Memorial case
- **Dr. Frank Minyard:** Orleans Parish Coroner

Katrina Timeline

- 8/23: Katrina begins to form over the Bahamas
- 8/26: Katrina makes landfall in Florida as a Tropical Storm
- 8/27: Katrina is upgraded to a Category 3 hurricane
- 8/28: New Orleans declares mandatory evacuation
- 8/29, 5:00am: Katrina makes landfall in Louisiana
- 8/29, 9:00am: 6-8 feet of water floods New Orleans
- 8/29, 2:00pm: Several levees burst, further flooding New Orleans
- 9/1: The last patients and staff from Memorial are evacuated by helicopter

Main Themes

- Medical ethics: Can we—and how should we— decide who lives and who dies?
- Human nature: How does threatened survival impact one's decisions?
- Perception: How does disaster affect one's perception of reality?
- Responsibility: In a vacuum of authority, how do we decide who leads?
- Justice: How do we determine what is just in extraordinary circumstances?
- Speaking up for what's right: What are the consequences of silence?
- Communication: What is the danger of speaking figuratively or abstractly?

Questions to Ask When Consulting

- What shocked or surprised you most in this book? Why?
- What stood out to you most in this book? Why?
- Which character did you relate to most? Why?
- Which character frustrated you most? Why?
- Were conditions at Memorial really as bad as the doctors believed they were?
- Who is most responsible for what happened at Memorial? The doctors, the administrators, the hospital's parent company? Why?
- Think of a time you were very frightened or anxious. How did that fear or anxiety change your perceptions? How did it change your behavior?
- Who should have the right to decide what is and isn't medically ethical?
- What would be a fair way to judge the actions of medical personnel in extraordinary circumstances?
- No other New Orleans hospitals had as many Katrina-related deaths as Memorial. Why do you think this is?
- Compare the preparedness of Memorial in 2005 to the preparedness of New York hospitals in 2012. What has changed? What lessons were learned?