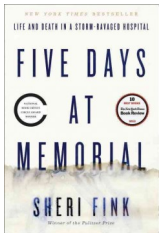


# Five Days at Memorial : life and death in a storm-ravaged hospital

## Five Days at Memorial



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Physician, humanitarian, and international journalist Sheri Fink has written an amazing book about what happens to even dedicated professionals in a crises that lasts for days. When a hospital became a flooded, steamy place without electricity, and the media constantly harangued about dangerous people attempting to break in, normal procedures quickly disappeared.

Do you remember that in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina much of New Orleans flooded and that the area covered included some hospitals and nursing homes? Do you also recall a heated trial at which one doctor was accused of mercy-killing elderly patients? This well-researched book investigates not only what happened during the five days that NOLA's Memorial Hospital was flooded but also the people involved: doctors, nurses, the New Orleans city coroner, patients and their families.

The subtitle says it all ?Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital.? The story is as riveting as any good thriller.

First, LifeCare, a nursing home in New Orleans East had to move all its patients?some very infirm --to the 7<sup>th</sup> floor of Memorial because their facility had flooded during the storm.

The medical personnel assigned to Memorial knew they might be there for several days.

Hurricanes strike New Orleans often so they were well prepared, or at least thought they were. It turns out the hospital did not have a working evacuation plan. Or the city an effective game plan for the disaster that everyone expected would some day happen finally occurred.

In typical New Orleans style, the nurses, doctors, and pharmacists packed kids, dogs, parents, and lots of food. The hospital allowed them to bring in their close relatives and pets so they could work through the storm and its aftermath without worrying about loved ones.

But no one expected what happened. The hospital survived the hurricane fine. But the day after flood waters invaded it, forcing staff to move patients to higher floors and to curtail most normal services. Later, the hospital lost electricity. That was a major problem because many of the patients, particularly the LifeCare once were on life support. Soon nurses and family members began fanning patients and manually filling their lungs with air.

What I liked particularly about the book is that Fink researched the life-histories and personalities of doctors and patients. She showed their likes and dislikes, their family members, in some cases even shared their dreams. In the case of Dr. Pou, she showed her dedication and extra care to several patients. She presented her sympathetically along with several other doctors and nurses who were later accused of giving patients too much morphine.

But in the end Fink raises many serious questions. ?Who gave them the right to play God?? as a patient?s daughter said. Why did the for-profit business that ran the hospital not provide more

support during the five days? Why did they rely only on the National Guard to rescue patients instead of hiring their own helicopters as some other hospitals did? Why did the coroner not recommend a murder charge when all of the expert toxicology evidence pointed to the likelihood that the patients were killed by drugs? Why did Memorial adopt a policy of rescuing the healthiest first, a strange departure from normal rescues? And why did these ?mercy-killings? happen on the last day even as helicopters were arriving again after a lapse of several days? Toward the end of the book, Fink visits hospitals flooded after Hurricane Sandy. You sense her shock and anger when she realizes that in the intervening seven years little has changed. The hospitals were still unprepared for a major disaster. For a thrilling and sobering look at a hospital and its employees and patients in crises read this book. You won?t forget it.

Posted by Dory L. on February 6, 2014

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