

Hurricane Katrina and Dr. Pou

During Hurricane Katrina, Memorial Hospital in New Orleans lost power and running water, and was flooded. Dr. Anna Pou and two nurses remained behind to stay with the patients who were too sick to be evacuated from the hospital. After the storm, forty-five bodies were found in the hospital in a makeshift morgue. Critics accused Dr. Pou and the nurses with hastening the death of some patients. After the investigation in July 2006, nearly a year after the storm, Dr. Pou and the nurses were arrested for the deaths of four patients.

Investigators determined that at least 17 patients were injected with morphine or the sedative midazolam, or both. A number of these patients were extremely ill and might not have survived being moved. Several were almost certainly not near death when they were injected, according to medical professionals who treated them at Memorial. An internist's review of their charts and autopsies were commissioned by investigators, but never made public.

Dr. Pou defended her actions, stating that her job during a crisis of that proportion was to ease the pain of her patients. Dr. Pou was indicted with second-degree murder charges, but a grand jury in Orleans Parish refused to indict her; the two nurses were found not guilty of murder.

Today Dr. Pou is an advocate of changing standards of care during emergency situations like those experienced during hurricane Katrina. She stated that informed consent is impossible during disasters and that doctors need to be able to evacuate the sickest or most severely injured patients last—along with those who have Do Not Resuscitate orders—an approach that she and her colleagues used as conditions worsened after Katrina.¹

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Did Dr. Pou and the nurses do the right thing in hastening the death of some of their patients during Katrina?
2. Should doctors be held to different standards of care during emergency situations?
3. Should the sickest be evacuated from hospitals first in emergency situations like Katrina, or should they be last because healthier patients have a better chance of surviving?

¹ http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/30/magazine/30doctors.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&