

My Last Hurricane

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This monster struck Aug. 25 as a Category 4 storm, annihilating the small, beautiful Texas town of Rockport before proceeding to the Houston area, where it stalled, dumping almost 52 inches of rain.

Experts estimate that 20,000,000,000,000 gallons of water fell, enough to fill the Great Salt Lake twice, the most rain fall from any storm in the history of the United States. Harvey then proceeded to the Texas-Louisiana border, leaving Beaumont, TX, totally without drinking water, and Port Arthur, TX, completely underwater.

The result was widespread **flooding and devastation**.

Nearly 200,000 homes were flooded, more than 40,000 people had to evacuate to shelters, 10,000 people had to be rescued from their homes, a chemical plant caught fire and resulted in the need for evacuation of all surrounding areas, refineries shut down, and 50 people died, mainly due to drowning. There were more than 300 tornado warnings, and several damaging tornadoes created more havoc. It is estimated that 1 million cars were flooded. Refugees from Hurricane Katrina in 2005 in New Orleans became refugees again.



Tragedies occurred. One very dedicated **policeman** went to work in spite of his wife's warnings and drowned in an underpass. One **DACA volunteer** was electrocuted while helping rescue people. One **3-year-old girl** was found by hanging onto the body of her dead mother. People had to break through their roofs so they could be picked up by helicopter.

The storm brought out the good in some people, and the ugly in some others. Volunteers came from all over the country to help evacuate people from their homes. Personal boats (the "**Texas Navy**"), Coast Guard boats, city fire and rescue boats, and air mattresses were used to transport people from their homes through streets that had turned into rivers with very strong currents.

The Good

The response by the Texas National Guard, FEMA, and most governmental agencies was timely and excellent.

A favorite Texas football player, **JJ Watt**, raised over \$30 million through personal efforts, donating every nickel of this to flood victims.

A local furniture store owner, "**Mattress Mack McInvale**," opened his showrooms, providing water, food, and comfort to several refugees. They actually slept on his display furniture. Volunteer rescuers and fire department rescuers slept on new mattresses in his display room.

Hospital personnel at all levels stayed in place for over 100 hours, working most of the time. When possible, they slept on Army cots. From the previous flooding experience, many of the hospitals had installed submarine doors in their tunnels to protect food, power, and sewage lines.

The **George R. Brown Convention Center** and many other churches, schools and community buildings were opened to thousands of refugees. Volunteers were so plentiful that some were turned away. One of our senior attending staff volunteered to provide medical help, but since these positions were filled, he and his team made and served chili to victims for hours on end.

One of our surgeons rode into the Medical Center by canoe to perform emergency surgery at night.

The Bad

One hospital did not fare as well. The biggest trauma hospital in the city was completely surrounded by a moat of water. Their basement flooded, a sewer line broke, food service was down to 1 day and patients had to be evacuated. The problem was that surrounding streets were now 9-foot rivers.

Houston does not have a great deal of zoning regulations. As such, developers took advantage and built around reservoirs, covering prairie and swampland (nature's kidney) with cement for shopping centers, streets, sidewalks, etc., which resulted in downstream runoff that helped flood the entire Houston community. There is now consideration to sell these homes at market value and tear out the cement surfacing to allow water absorption.

Reservoirs that filled had to be drained to avoid catastrophic flooding. As such, downstream bayous flooded and there was constant flooding of several homes in the path of the bayou.

A local megachurch locked its doors in spite of requests to house refugees. They did offer prayers for the victims. After a major negative community response, they finally opened their doors (and requested contributions).

We are **now** looking at a major population of mosquitoes, which will carry dengue, West Nile virus, Zika virus, and other diseases. In addition, because of all the raw sewage, typhus and typhoid are anticipated.

Within one week another major hurricane—**Irma**, the most powerful ever seen in the Atlantic—hit Florida (**see the Hurricane Irma blog by Dr. Rani Gereige, PIR's Associate Editor for CME**) after devastating the Virgin Islands and Cuba with Category 5 force. Irma carried more wind damage than water damage; remember that it is water that kills, but severe wind can as well. **Jose** followed closely And next came **Maria**.

Personally ...

Initially I slept through the tornado warnings. Deafness has an advantage—I never heard them. A major tornado severely damaged 50 homes less than a mile from where I live.

I was under mandatory evacuation because a levee behind the house was threatening to burst from a record water level in the Brazos River. My wife had recently died, so it was just the dog and me. I was able to navigate around various flooded streets to get to my son's house, which was not near any waterway. There, since he and his family were out of town, I was in solitary confinement because the streets were a moat, but I had enough water and food and never lost power, so I was comfortably positioned.

On the other side of the levee, there is a drainage ditch that overflowed and flooded 400 homes up to approximately the 4-foot level. All of these homes are (were) in a very expensive new development. People had to clean out their entire first floors, throw out their furniture (photo), and cut out a 4-foot height of sheetrock drywall throughout their homes.



I was very fortunate, but the evacuation created a feeling like the one I had in the Army when others got sent to Vietnam: survivor's remorse.

Suffice it to say the next hurricane warning will have me in another location.

Reflections

We as pediatricians practice preventive medicine, and the same approach should be taken regarding global warming. The Gulf of Mexico had a record warm winter with water temperatures never dipping below 75°. Overdevelopment and too much concrete along with inadequate zoning regulations must be addressed. Politicians responding to various industries that are threatened by energy regulations should be replaced.

We are Houston strong and steady. We will respond and recover. But, oh my, this has been awful for so many.

- [Before and After Irma](#)