

Testimony of Jon Sewell
Before the Subcommittee on Oversight and
Investigations
January 26, 2006

My name is Jon Sewell. I served as the CEO for Chalmette Medical Center (CMC) in Chalmette, Louisiana. CMC is owned and operated by a subsidiary of Universal Health Services (UHS) and served the residents of St Bernard Parish, and to a lesser extent those of Orleans Parish.

CMC had 230 beds and provided a wide array of services including cardiac surgery, orthopaedics, hyperbarics, and a 30 bed I.C.U. The hospital's annual admissions totaled approximately 9,000 and emergency room visits approximately 25,000. CMC, until it was destroyed by the hurricane, was the only Inpatient and Emergency Room provider in St Bernard Parish.

Over the seven days prior to Hurricane Katrina hitting landfall, hospital officials, the Hospital Chief of Staff, and the local Emergency Preparedness Council watched the storm closely. For most of that time, the hurricane not considered a threat because as of 11 a.m. on Friday morning, Katrina was projected to hit the Florida panhandle. It became a greater concern when a Friday 5 p.m. projection had the storm center projected to hit near Gulfport, Alabama. By Saturday morning, the projections had moved the storm landfall to somewhere near the New Orleans area.

CMC decided Saturday morning to implement its disaster plan. We had already canceled elective surgeries the prior day and began to discharge any patients who had a means of evacuation. Attempts to transfer patients to other hospitals were stalled because the storm track had been so variable that any hospitals within a hundred miles were still potentially in harms way and were reluctant to admit patients. Ambulances to transport patients were also scarce because many special needs patients, nursing home residents and other hospitals were all attempting to move patients at the same time.

CMC then began discussions with it's sister hospital, Methodist Medical Center, to attempt to transport as many patients as possible because Methodist had a taller structure and a more secure emergency power system. Sunday was spent moving all ICU, Inpatient Rehab, Psychiatric and Skilled Nursing patients to Methodist. This was achieved by using a combination of school buses (for ambulatory patients) and ambulances (for more critically ill patients). We lost access to ambulances sometime Sunday afternoon and began preparations for riding out the storm with the remaining patients. At that time, our census was 47 patients, and approximately two hundred staff and family members were at CMC.

Our disaster plan called for the movement of all essential supplies to the second floor (CMC's top floor), including food, water, pharmaceuticals, and other clinical supplies. We had ordered supplemental supplies earlier in the week and our final stock was estimated to last four to five days, if required.

As you all know now, the Western eye of the storm passed over St Bernard Parish around 8 a.m. Monday. Some roof was peeled back and two windows were blown in. By 9:00 a.m., we thought the worst had passed and we were considering a plan to move patients and supplies back to their original locations, but then the flooding started. By the time the flooding ended, we had approximately 14 feet of water. Our emergency generators flooded at approximately 10:30, and cell phones were inoperative by noon. At that point, we had no power, air conditioning or communications with anyone outside of the hospital with the exception of a two-way radio link to the Fire Department. While the Fire Department was very supportive, they were not located in the same building as the sheriff's department or the Parish command center. We never were able to make direct contact with any of the other Parish government agencies.

Shortly after the storm had subsided, 200 local citizens who had not evacuated began showing up at the hospital, seeking medical attention and shelter. They came by boat and, in some cases, were quite ill. Three patients were brought in suffering from acute distress. These patients were stabilized by hospital personnel. The number of refugees nearly doubled the population of the hospital and became a significant distraction and security threat. With the assistance of the local sheriff's department, they were all transferred by boat to the Parish shelter on Tuesday.

Also on Tuesday, Parish officials arrived at the hospital by boat to inform us that a

MASH unit had been set up at the local jail with power and air conditioning. Parish officials recommended that the hospital consider transferring it's patients to the MASH unit.

On Wednesday morning, we began transferring patients by boat to the shelter with the help of the Parish fire department and local good Samaritans. As we transferred patients, we also sent medical staff and supplies to support the patients during their stay at the MASH unit. The transportation of all patients was completed by Wednesday, mid afternoon.

On Thursday, a helicopter from the National Guard arrived to begin evacuating the remaining employees and their family members. I was among the members of this group. We were taken to Louis Armstrong International Airport and placed in the MASH unit there which contained nearly 2000 patients. The unit was clearly understaffed and our group offered to assist in providing patient care to the MASH unit. The offer was accepted by the emergency physician charged with oversight of the unit. Nearly all of the employees present volunteered to help render medical assistance to the patients lying on stretchers, the floor or on luggage carousels. After about an hour, we were approached by an official with FEMA who ordered CMC staff away from the patient area because we were not authorized by FEMA to provide care in the MASH unit. We were then placed in the general shelter population of the airport.

Around midnight, another health care system, HCA, offered the group from Methodist and CMC transportation to Lafayette on buses they had secured.

Notably, during the four days following the storm, the hospital received no supplies from any federal or state agencies and very limited supplies from the local Parish. UHS, our management company, had immediately after the flooding secured helicopters to deliver food, water, fuel and other supplies. Although those efforts were frustrated by difficulties in getting access to airspace eventually some of those supplies were delivered to Methodist Hospital.

UHS also set up a command center immediately after the storm to provide assistance to families seeking information regarding UHS patients and employees at CMC and Methodist who provided patient care during the storm and to keep them updated with the most current and accurate information available.

Finally, I would like to recognize all of the doctors, staff, family members of staff, local citizens and first responders from the Parish sheriff's and fire department for providing extraordinary support during one of this nation's greatest natural disasters. I was privileged to witness a group of people, soon to become refugees themselves, rise up and work collectively to ensure that our patients were provided the best care possible. I can honestly say that I witnessed more acts of heroism and courage during this crisis than anyone could imagine.

