

La. doctor cleared in patient deaths recalls storm

by newsweek

Trapped in a hospital with 2,000 people in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Dr. Anna Pou recalls her throat burning from the rancid smell.

Toilets had backed up and temperatures in the eight-story building reached almost 110 degrees because the windows didn't open. Power had failed, levees broke and 80 percent of New Orleans was flooded, including the hospital basement where the generators were.

It was completely dark at night. Stories of murders, gangs raping women and children circulated through Memorial Medical Center, where the people, including more than 200 patients, feared for their lives.

Pou, the doctor accused of giving lethal doses of drugs to four patients during the chaos recalled the four days of misery in a recent interview with The Associated Press. It was her most detailed account of the scene where 34 patients died since the storm three years ago.

"You can't really understand what it was like if you weren't there," Pou said. "Nothing can describe it."

It began as a typical weekend for Pou, who wasn't worried when she made her way to Memorial in August 2005.

Hurricane Katrina appeared headed to Florida. Even when warnings were issued for New Orleans, the respected cancer surgeon never thought of leaving. She stayed with her patients in what would become a personal and professional hell.

After the storm passed Monday, Aug. 29, it seemed the decision not to evacuate patients and staff was a good one. They didn't know levees were collapsing.

"We made it through the storm pretty good," Pou remembered. "On Monday, it was just a little hot, but we had some generators working and food and water twice a day."

By Tuesday, water was rising in the streets, eventually reaching 10 feet. The hospital basement flooded and the generators failed.

When nightfall came, the hospital and the city were in darkness. Water pressure dropped, toilets backed up and the temperatures began to swelter.

"The smell got to be rancid in no time," Pou said. "It burned the back of your throat."

The deteriorating situation had dire consequences. Those trapped in the hospital could hear voices in the dark. People had broken into a credit union office across the street and holed up there.

"We started hearing stories about murders, about gangs raping women and children," Pou said. "The women that had their children there were really scared."

They had a few flashlights but no spare batteries.

"One of the nurses showed me how to bump my foot against the next step to find it," Pou said. "We counted the steps from one floor to another so we wouldn't miss one and fall."

Pou said staff struggled to climb stairwells, carry supplies, and spent two-hour shifts squeezing ventilators to keep patients alive.

"The heat was so terrible, it wore you down," Pou said. "We were trying to keep the patients comfortable. The 9-year-old daughter of one of the nurses even took shifts fanning them."

Airboats evacuated some patients and babies from the nursery, but most remained. All Pou said she could do was try to keep critically ill patients comfortable.

"Tuesday night was when we realized we were going to be there for a while," Pou said.

They gathered supplies, rationed food and water with non-patients, and prayed.

About seven medical staffers, including Pou, stayed with patients. Others went to the roof and the ground floor to coordinate the intermittent rescue efforts with the few boats and helicopters that showed up.

"When a helicopter left, we never knew if they would be back," Pou recalled. "They might be sent to another rescue. And after dark it was too dangerous for them to fly at all."

Under the military's orders, the staff did reverse triage. The healthiest patients were taken out first in an effort to save the greatest number of people.

Many had to be carried to the roof. It was slow, backbreaking work, with as many as 10 people struggling up the dark stairs with a stretcher. At least 34 people died waiting for rescuers.

Pou was one of the last to leave Memorial. She returned to New Orleans her house had not been flooded

â€” from Baton Rouge a few months later at Thanksgiving. In January 2006, she started working at a Baton Rouge hospital, trying to put Katrina behind her.

Then, in July 2007, she was greeted by four police officers on her arrival home from a 13-hour day of surgery. They handcuffed her, still in her scrubs, and drove her to jail. She was booked on four counts of second-degree murder.

Attorney General Charles Foti accused Pou and two nurses of using a "lethal cocktail" of medication to kill four elderly patients. Pou has always maintained she killed no one during those desperate days, though she acknowledges patients were sedated.

She was forced to give up private practice and started teaching at the LSU medical school in Baton Rouge.

Months of pain and frustration set in.

A year after their arrest, the New Orleans district attorney dropped charges against the nurses, and a grand jury refused to indict Pou. Two civil lawsuits in the deaths are pending.

"I felt very alone," Pou said of her year of fighting the criminal accusations. "Even if people were around me I felt an intense loneliness. It was as if no one knew what I was going through."

Pou's supporters believed she and the nurses acted heroically. A group of doctors and nurses held a rally on the anniversary of her arrest, and hundreds turned in support.

Her experience helped her get landmark state legislation approved to protect the actions of doctors and nurses during disasters.

"It was that support and prayer that got me through it," said Pou, who is back in private practice.

As Katrina's third anniversary nears, Pou said the experience was life-altering.

"I've learned a lot from this," she said. "I thought I had suffered at times in my life, but I had no idea the depths of pain one person could feel. I think that has made me a better person and certainly a more compassionate doctor."

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