Caring for Patients in Puerto Rico

Conditions in Puerto Rico were austere after Hurricane Maria made landfall on Wednesday, September 20, pushing 155 mph winds across the island with the same force as a thunderous tornado 50 to 60 miles wide and leaving utter devastation to the infrastructure, power grid, and water supply.

In the days that followed—as hospitals, clinics, doctors’ offices, and pharmacies remained closed or opened with very limited capacity—the health care risks to residents escalated. Lack of routine care and medications exacerbated chronic health conditions, while those who incurred new injuries—for example, kerosene burns, scorpion bites, or cuts as they cleaned up debris with machetes and chainsaws—needed urgent treatment. Contaminated floodwaters, as well as the lack of access to clean water, had the added potential

Hiker Reunites With Medical Students Who Came to His Aid

Miracles happen. Kindness matters. A touch of the hand can mean “everything.” Those were some of the messages that Matthew Fredricks delivered on Monday, November 27, when he was reunited with a group of students at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai who weeks before had aided and comforted him on a hiking trail when he was having a heart attack.

“In your studies, you are going to learn the mechanics of medicine, you are going to learn all the technical terms and procedures,” Mr. Fredricks said. “But what you guys did instinctively, you can’t be taught that. You showed me compassion, and I am amazingly grateful.” Mr. Fredricks, a kitchen designer from New City, Rockland
to unleash rampant viral and bacterial illnesses, such as conjunctivitis, norovirus, and gastrointestinal infections.

Sixteen hundred miles away in New York City, concerned faculty and staff throughout the Mount Sinai Health System—some with ties to Puerto Rico, but many without—were eager to help their fellow Americans. And, by early October, three physicians and seven nurses were selected to participate in the first of two medical relief missions to Fajardo, Puerto Rico. A second team of 10 volunteers would follow them in late October. The missions—staffed by individuals representing all hospitals across the Health System—were part of a massive effort involving the Governor’s Office, the New York State Department of Health, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Greater New York Hospital Association, the Healthcare Association of New York State, the New York State Nurses Association, and 1199 SEIU.

“The selfless devotion of our volunteers to care for patients under these conditions reflects the values of the Mount Sinai Health System and the health care profession,” says Kenneth L. Davis, MD, President and Chief Executive Officer of the Mount Sinai Health System. “We, and the population of Puerto Rico, are all in their debt.”

Adds Kevin Chason, DO, Clinical Director of Emergency Management, Mount Sinai Health System, and Assistant Professor of Emergency Medicine, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai: “This was a tremendous team effort from the Health System, and we also truly appreciate the departments and the staff at home who generously reorganized schedules and covered shifts to support these volunteers and allow them to do this important work.”

Stacey A. Conklin, MSN, MS, RN, Vice President for Patient Care Services, New York Eye and Ear Infirmary of Mount Sinai, led Mount Sinai’s first team. Under large white tents—which were set up and supplied by the National Disaster Medical System in a lot adjacent to a functioning private hospital and staffed with other providers from Disaster Medical Assistance Teams—the volunteers helped manage a clinic and a triage area for walk-in patients.

“The need was great and the team was superb,” recalls Ms. Conklin. “We worked together seamlessly and tirelessly for long hours and without any days off, sometimes seeing close to 200 patients a day. Every team member was extremely grateful for the opportunity to serve the community of Fajardo.”

Ultimately, Team One helped treat 1,656 patients during their time there, with few comforts themselves—eating prepackaged meals, sleeping in barracks-style cots, and using outdoor portable toilets and sinks.

The camp, as it was called, was able to provide routine primary care, cardiac monitoring and oxygen for more urgent patient needs, and pediatric and women’s health services, and was equipped with an isolation area. While hundreds of cases involved common injuries and illnesses, minor trauma, and infections, the team also
saw many potentially serious cases that occurred when patients were unable to manage chronic conditions.

When a diabetic man presented with abdominal pain, the team was alarmed. Because he had not been able to get insulin, his body was breaking down fat as fuel, and, with dangerously high blood-sugar levels and an increasing concentration of acid in his blood, he was spiraling toward a state of ketoacidosis, a fatal condition if not quickly and aggressively managed. The team was able to stabilize him after several hours.

The second Mount Sinai team of three doctors, two nurse practitioners, and five nurses, led by Trina Cosme, BSN, RN, Assistant Nurse Manager, Labor and Delivery at Mount Sinai West, arrived in Fajardo on Tuesday, October 24, and after an intensive day of training they assumed the duties of Team One, treating nearly 2,000 patients.

Ms. Cosme recalls a visit by Eric D. Hargan, the Acting Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and Robert Kadlec, MD, Assistant Secretary for Preparedness and Response, both showing support for every volunteer assisting in the effort, including a group of young Puerto Rican high school and college students— aspiring nurses and doctors—who helped the Mount Sinai staff. “We were embraced by the community,” says Ms. Cosme, who was also grateful for a local culinary institute that occasionally brought them home-cooked meals. Mostly, Ms. Cosme wants to recognize her “awesome” team members. “We were from different hospitals and had never met before this trip, but we became a well-oiled team of volunteers on a lifesaving mission to help the people of Puerto Rico.”

The medical necessities varied. We helped educate the communities about their increased health risks and distributed food, water, and water filters. Because of the lack of access to usual care, patients with chronic conditions were on the verge of, or had already suffered, acute exacerbations, which we treated. Mental health issues were, and still are, major concerns, especially post-traumatic stress syndrome and depression. There was an alert for cholera, leptospirosis, Zika virus, dengue fever, and hepatitis A, among other contagious illnesses.

Like many other Puerto Ricans, I had not slept well after September 20 when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico. In the days that followed, I joined a group of health care professionals in New York City to discuss how we could help. With the support of the New York State government, nonprofit organizations and health care institutions including Mount Sinai, and other smaller groups, I was on a plane to Puerto Rico three weeks later with volunteers from Doctors for Maria Relief, a team of physicians, nurses, nurse practitioners, and logistics personnel on a mission trip to assess, treat, and educate communities and individuals to help them manage ongoing medical issues and prevent possible disease outbreaks.

In Toa Baja, we helped in a clinic that was based in a school building, triaging patients to the appropriate service — social work, psychology, nursing, pharmacy — and providing medical evaluation for primary care, pediatrics, and rehabilitation medicine. In Caguas, we set up small clinical areas in community centers. Lastly, we were escorted to Utuado by the National Guard, who helped clear the path for us to reach several inaccessible mountain communities.

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A Doctor’s Reflection: Sleepless Nights, and a Desire to Help His Beloved Puerto Rico

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Carmen Rivera of Isabela, Puerto Rico, was seeing black dots in her left eye and having trouble focusing when she visited a doctor who diagnosed her with a retinal detachment and scheduled her for emergency surgery on Tuesday, September 19. As Hurricane Maria approached Puerto Rico, however, the surgery was postponed, and when the island, including the hospital where she was scheduled for surgery, was left without electricity, she faced a serious health crisis. Without immediate treatment, Ms. Rivera risked losing her central vision.

“My doctor in Puerto Rico suggested I get off the island as soon as possible to have the surgery,” recalls Ms. Rivera, whose children stepped in to help—first by driving long distances to get cellular service, and finally by reaching relatives in the Bronx who arranged for her trip to New York City. “By the time I arrived here on October 2, my vision got worse and I couldn't see anything out of my left eye,” says Ms. Rivera.

Family members brought her to New York Eye and Ear Infirmary of Mount Sinai, where retina specialist Jessica Lee, MD, Assistant Professor of Ophthalmology, Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, performed sight-saving emergency surgery on Monday, October 9. Ms. Rivera underwent retinal detachment repair surgery, which involved placing a gas bubble into the eye to keep the retina in place. “She is recovering nicely,” Dr. Lee says a few weeks after the surgery, noting that it can take about two months for the gas bubble in the eye to dissolve, at which time vision can further improve. At a follow-up visit on Tuesday, December 5, Dr. Lee reports, “Her retina is completely attached and she is doing well.”

“There are no words to describe how grateful I am that everything fell into place so that I could be in New York City and have the surgery. I am so thankful for the excellent care I received,” says Ms. Rivera. “Regaining my vision has been amazing. If I weren't here, I would still be waiting for the surgery.”

Leadership, faculty, and staff from the New York Eye and Ear Infirmary remain eager to help other patients from Puerto Rico. They recently partnered with Bascom Palmer Eye Institute, the Puerto Rican Society of Ophthalmology, and ophthalmologists throughout the United States to launch “Eye Care: Puerto Rico,” a program that facilitates access to eye care to evacuees in need of emergency care.

Hosting a Fellow From Puerto Rico

As the University of Puerto Rico Sports Medicine Fellowship program in San Juan struggled to maintain regular clinic hours after Hurricane Maria, Mount Sinai’s Department of Rehabilitation Medicine offered to host the University’s current fellow, Brenda Castillo, MD, left, for an elective rotation. “Dr. Castillo’s training program is my alma mater,” says Gerardo Miranda-Comas, MD, Assistant Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine and Associate Program Director of the Department’s Sports Medicine Fellowship. “When I realized that her fellowship was directly affected by the devastation, we invited her to spend some time with us.”

With the support of Joseph E. Herrera, DO, Chair and Lucy G. Moses Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine for the Mount Sinai Health System, fellowship coordinator Ana Peña, and the Graduate Medical Education office, Dr. Castillo worked a month at Mount Sinai’s sports medicine clinics evaluating patients and performing ultrasound-guided injections and spinal procedures—as well as helping to provide medical coverage at several local high school football games.

“Dr. Miranda-Comas and his entire staff allowed me to continue my training as a sports medicine fellow, and for that I am truly grateful,” says Dr. Castillo, who completed her rotation Friday, December 1, and has returned to Puerto Rico. “It was definitely an excellent hands-on learning experience for me.”

Beloved Puerto Rico

The devastation on the island was hard to perceive and understand before I traveled there. My trip helped me comprehend the needs of my homeland, and sadly, the severity of the damage. It will take some time for Puerto Rico to recover, but I have returned confident that it will happen.

By Gerardo Miranda-Comas, MD, Assistant Professor of Rehabilitation Medicine at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai.
Neurosurgery Resident Is Honored for Service

Ian Thomas McNeill, MD, a fifth-year Neurosurgery resident at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, was honored recently at the 48th annual African American Day Parade for his service in New York City at large, and at Mount Sinai. Dr. McNeill is the founder and leader of Doctors Reaching Minority Males Exploring Neuroscience (DR. MMEN), a summer mentorship and immersion program for black and Latino young men entering their senior year in high school.

“We are very proud of what Dr. McNeill has achieved in launching the DR. MMEN program,” says Joshua B. Bederson, MD, Professor and Chair, Neurosurgery, Mount Sinai Health System. “It is important that we promote diversity and the advancement of talented individuals who might not otherwise have these opportunities.”

Actors Brighten the Day for Patients and Families

The stars of “Daddy’s Home 2,” Will Ferrell and Mark Wahlberg, brought smiles to the faces of pediatric patients during bedside visits at Kravis Children’s Hospital at Mount Sinai, on Thursday, November 9. The occasion was sponsored by Lollipop Theater Network, a nonprofit organization that works with motion picture studios to bring first-run movies to children in hospitals nationwide. In addition to the visit, several adolescent patients and their family members had the opportunity to watch the new movie at their bedsides. “It was wonderful, a real morale booster,” says Cheryl Strauss, Child Life Specialist with the Child Life and Creative Arts Therapy Department at Kravis Children’s Hospital. “Meeting the actors brightened the day for patients and their families.”

Medical Student Places Among the Top 100 In the New York City Marathon

Second-year medical student Joseph Schnitter says the support he received from his family and friends at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai helped him place among the top 100 male runners in the TCS New York City Marathon on Sunday, November 5. He completed the 26.2-mile marathon in 2 hours, 33 minutes, and 5 seconds, his best-ever showing.

“The crowd along the course was unbelievable,” he says. “Seeing my supportive family—who made the trip from Buffalo to watch—along with so many folks from Mount Sinai, was a huge boost and a major reason why I was able to run the time I did.” In each of his two prior races—in Buffalo and Boston—Mr. Schnitter’s time was approximately 2 hours and 40 minutes. The 2017 New York City Marathon winners, Geoffrey Kamworor of Kenya and American Shalane Flanagan, finished the race in 2:10:53, and 2:26:53, respectively.
Hiker Reunites With Students Who Aided Him  
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County, was at the center of a dramatic rescue on Sunday, October 22, after he collapsed on a steep trail in Harriman State Park. Before he was lifted off the mountain by a helicopter crew—an event shown on local newscasts—he was aided by the group of medical students who were also hiking that day. Weeks later, Mr. Fredricks contacted the Icahn School of Medicine seeking a reunion with the students, and it was arranged at the Annenberg Building.

“You are incredible for making this effort,” David Muller, MD, Dean for Medical Education, and the Marietta and Charles C. Morchand Chair for Medical Education, told Mr. Fredricks. “What happened to you is really rare, but what is even more rare is that you made this effort to find every single person who helped you.”

Mr. Fredricks, 59, is an avid hiker and skier, even serving on the National Ski Patrol. A few months before the heart attack, he had what seemed to be persistent heartburn and visited his local primary care doctor and cardiologist, but a stress test and imaging were inconclusive. Mr. Fredricks had hiked the trail—a challenging 2.5-mile round trip—five times in recent months, but on October 22, he stopped near the top because he felt intense pain in his chest and arms. He called it a “miracle” that he was clearheaded enough to pick a resting spot—a flat outcropping of rock—that would be accessible to rescuers. In a second “miracle,” a Pennsylvania couple to whom he had given directions at the bottom of the trail, stopped to ask if he had made it to the top. He told them, “I didn’t, and I’m in trouble.”

The husband called 911 on his cellphone, and then a third “miracle” occurred—the arrival of the Mount Sinai students. The couple asked if they had any medical knowledge. “They were sort of joking, I think,” said Halley Kaye-Kauderer, a second-year student. “I told them ‘Not really, but probably more than anyone else here.’” The nine young people are members of WildMed, a group of students interested in the specialty of wilderness medicine—providing emergency care in remote settings. They huddled around Mr. Fredricks, took his pulse, and questioned him about his condition. Letitia Li, a first-year student, folded a lightweight blue towel and put it under Mr. Fredricks’s head. (He kept it, and now wears it “as a fashion statement.”) Second-year students Zina Huxley-Reicher and Aliza Green sat on either side of him. “Aliza simply said, ‘I’m going to hold your hand.’ In that moment, it meant everything,” Mr. Fredricks said, adding that he felt a sense of calm, despite excruciating pain.

After about an hour, emergency responders arrived and sent the students on their way. Mr. Fredricks was taken to the Westchester Medical Center, where a blockage was found in his right coronary artery. Now he is watching his diet, exercising moderately, and getting follow-up cardiac care. Mr. Fredricks is also trying to thank everyone he can, reaching out to the helicopter pilot, his hospital team, and the rescue workers. He invited the students to go skiing on the mountain he patrols, and he brought each of them a blue towel similar to the one Ms. Li gave him.

“You did the right thing,” Mr. Fredricks told the students who aided him. “Keep doing it. You are in the right place, and you are all amazing people.”

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