

June 2009 Special Supplement

Hurricane Season 2009: A physician's guide

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Health First Information Hotline (activated before impending storm):

321-434-8989

(select Option #4 for Medical Staff updates)

"Just remember it will be a very bad and memorable hurricane season, even if there is a total of only one Atlantic hurricane, if that one strikes your area," says *The Weather Channel's* tropical storm expert Dr. Steve Lyons. His point is well taken as the 2009 Atlantic Hurricane Season begins June 1 and runs through the end of November. It's vital that all physicians on the Medical Staffs of Health First hospitals have the necessary information to facilitate the highest level of patient care during any emergency. Storm researchers with the Tropical Meteorology Project at Colorado State University are predicting 11 named storms this season, with five of those at hurricane strength and two becoming "major storms" (Category 3, 4, or 5 on the Saffir-Simpson Scale). The annual predictions, while an inexact science, remind us that we should be prepared now in the event that some of the predicted storms form and impact our area. No one can fully predict any Hurricane Season's outcome but we can be fully prepared to handle any situation that develops.

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Seasonal reminders

- Each hospital system in Brevard County adopts one Special Needs Shelter in Brevard County to help augment medical staffing needs there. For 2009, the shelter at **Quest Elementary School in Viera** is assigned to Health First, with Health First Physicians (HFP) and Health First (HF) associates assisting at the shelter as needed.
- If your patients are eligible for a Special Needs Shelter, they must pre-register for this option each year through Brevard County's Department of Emergency Management at 321-637-4088.
- The **Pro-Health & Fitness Center in Viera** will be utilized as a respite shelter for key Health First associates who need to be available immediately post-storm, Medical Staff members, and their immediate family members.
- County emergency officials will treat your hospital Medical Staff identification (ID) badge as a "pass" to get you through roadblocks as needed to perform crucial functions at the hospital and Special Needs Shelter. Your ID badge will also allow you to be out past any curfews as part of your job.
- Remind your patients to keep an adequate supply of their medications on hand in case of evacuations. Some community pharmacies have added generator capacity and may be able to open more quickly after a storm, but preparation before any storm warning is still paramount.

Inter-hospital cooperation

The Medical Staff Offices at Cape Canaveral Hospital (CCH), Holmes Regional Medical Center (HRMC), and Palm Bay Hospital (PBH) will work together closely during any storm that requires an evacuation at CCH.

- When a hurricane is approaching from the East or Southeast, our plan requires that CCH-based associates and physicians prepare the campus for evacuation. Typically, storms approaching from the East and Southeast lead to mandatory evacuation based on Brevard County mandates for evacuation of the beaches and barrier islands. If evacuations are ordered, all evacuated CCH patients will be transferred to HRMC. In the event that HRMC does not have adequate capacity, some CCH patients may be transferred to PBH.
- If a hurricane is approaching from Florida's West Coast, the hurricane plan may be partially activated, and may not include an evacuation of CCH based on variables such as predicted wind speed upon landfall, plus the direction and strength of the storm once it crosses the Florida Peninsula. Since CCH may not be evacuated, such cases could lead to a "shelter-in-place" scenario, with enough staff staying on-site at CCH during the storm to care for patients who require hospitalization. The expanded emergency generator system at CCH can power critical electrical, cooling, and sewage systems, providing more flexibility during storms that may not require an evacuation and allowing for a smoother re-opening following a major storm.
- If a physician with dual staff privileges at CCH and Wuesthoff Health System desires that his or her patient be moved to a Wuesthoff hospital in Rockledge or Melbourne, this will have to be done as a transfer prior to CCH's evacuation, if beds are available, and according to that Wuesthoff hospital's protocol and approval.

Patient care guidelines

Based on discussions between medical directors involved in this process, here are our Medical Staff member patient care guidelines for the 2009 Hurricane Season:

- **CCH Medical Staff** members have the responsibility to provide care for their own patients transferred to HRMC or PBH, or personally arrange satisfactory coverage using the guidelines discussed below.
- **The CCH Hospitalists group** will provide physician coverage at HRMC or PBH for those patients who are assigned to their service.
- **Health First Physicians (HFP)** will provide a group of three to four CCH HFP doctors to cover patients transferred to HRMC or PBH.
- **Non-HFP doctors** can request that the CCH Hospitalists group covers their patients if the request is made ahead of time, physician-to-physician. The CCH Hospitalists have their own assigned patients to cover as well and it cannot be assumed that they can accept responsibility for an additional, large number of transferred patients.
- If **CCH Medical Staff members** who aren't affiliated with HFP aren't able to go to HRMC or PBH to care for their patients and the CCH Hospitalists are unable to assume care for any reason, non-HFP physicians may ask about coverage for their patient by an HFP CCH Medical Staff member who's reporting to HRMC or PBH. Again, this arrangement is made physician-to-physician, and flexibility and early planning are important.
- **The referring CCH Medical Staff member** is responsible for speaking with the covering physicians during the transfer process, so that any care plans are thoroughly communicated.

During an emergency, your key links in this process will be the CCH, HRMC, and PBH Medical Staff Offices. Our offices will coordinate the list of physicians on call at CCH, HRMC, and PBH and help facilitate the smooth transfer of your patients. The HFP medical group hurricane roster is based on the existing on-call schedule at the time an emergency is declared. Emergency Medical Staff privileges can be granted on a case-by-case basis in keeping with Medical Staff by-laws.

Awareness & planning

As soon as a Tropical Storm forms, it's important to monitor news media reports and hospital communications for updates. If the storm escalates in strength and our area is in the projected path, physicians need to stay in close contact with their hospital's Medical Staff Office for timely updates about emergency declarations. In addition to coordinating patient transfers before each storm, physicians at each of the three HF hospitals are expected to:

- Cancel elective surgeries and procedures beginning approximately 30 to 36 hours before predicted landfall to avoid lengthy post-operative hospitalization that strains the system.
- Assess all patients for possible discharge 24 hours before an official evacuation order is expected, as we hope to avoid a high volume of discharges on the day of evacuation.
- For physicians working during a severe storm or hurricane, respite space is available at HRMC and PBH, including the physicians' family members. A limited number of physicians may also be able to respite at the Pro-Health & Fitness Center in Viera as noted.

Emergency information sources

You'll receive letters and personal hurricane planning information from your Medical Staff Office. Further information, including specific disaster plans for each hospital, are available on the HF website www.health-first.org. During a severe storm or hurricane, the Medical Staff Offices will be communicating via pager, phone, or in-person with each and every Medical Staff member who has patients impacted by the emergency. Our offices will also liaise with the large, non-HF medical practices to help disseminate information.

The **Health First Information Hotline** is accessible at **321-434-8989** and will be updated frequently during any emergency, with **Option #4** dedicated to Medical Staff-specific information. This information also will be available on the HF intranet, **Inside Health First**, and through the HF Internet physician portal and the **Crisis Information Center page** under "For Clinicians & Staff" on the home page sidebar.

After a storm

If medical facilities are closed by a storm event, it's important to get them re-opened and functioning as quickly as possible. Local utilities have designated all Brevard hospitals as part of the critical infrastructure with the highest priority for service resumption. HF Physicians and CCH Hospitalists have pre-set assignments to assist with patient transfers back to CCH for its re-opening. Because cell phone and pager use may be limited by storm damage, each physician is responsible for checking the **Health First Information Hotline** at **321-434-8989 (Option #4)** for instructions on when to begin hospital rounds. It's especially critical that all physicians with pre-assigned, on-call responsibilities be available for duty and either call the hospital or simply report for rounds as planned. Historically, cell phones, pagers, and answering services are unreliable during a storm, so it's vitally important that physicians listed on the call schedule take the initiative and responsibility to report for duty and be prepared for possible respite at the hospital.

If you have questions or concerns about any issue during this Hurricane Season, please contact the Medical Staff Office for the HF hospital at which you're a Medical Staff member.