



# Chaos Outside, Kindness Inside: On Lockdown During Hurricane Florence

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**M**y residents and I were the family medicine storm team in charge of caring for patients during the hospital lockdown that resulted when Hurricane Florence hit the city of Wilmington. As an attending of only a year, my concerns were twofold. One was giving our patients and community the best care possible and the other was keeping my residents healthy and safe. Unaware of how long the lockdown would last and knowing how stressful it would be, to protect the well-being of the team, I decided we should share all our meals together. My goal was to decompress and debrief on what we saw each day and after, if possible, to focus on something other than the storm outside.

These family meals usually ended in our joking about what variety of “meat plop” the cafeteria would serve that day. All jokes aside, what the meat plops lacked in visual appeal, they made up for in taste.

After day one, the winds began to pick up outside. Jokes and quips like “Is this storm actually going to come?” were no longer heard when the clouds rolled over us. Our rounding room was located in the basement directly adjacent to the temporary daycare the hospital had set up for children of employees working the lockdown. We would cross in and out of the area on the way to and from where our patients were in the hospital tower.

They were initially expecting 80 kids but by the time the storm hit they were sheltering over 120. Every time I passed the children all I could think about was how scared they must be. Earlier in the week my wife and two young daughters evacuated to Charlotte to escape the storm and each time I saw the kids I was reminded of my own.

Knowing that we were so near to the temporary daycare, I anticipated we would be in contact with the kids quite a bit. With this in mind, the morning prior to the lockdown I stopped at my clinic and emptied the drawer filled with stickers and stuffed animals that we used for well-child checks. With the storm barreling down and the clinic likely to flood, I figured they would be of more use for the daycare. As I left that morning my stomach sank when I realized that could be the last time I ever walked through my clinic.

When the initial bands of the storm passed and the eye wall grew closer, the building the residents and I were in took significant damage. Two floors above us, a large portion of roof was destroyed, causing flooding that began to leak down the stairwells and through the ceiling.

The eye wall continued to lash the building as my team and I decided to pass our stickers and stuffed animals to the kids next door. When we opened the door, the hall with the

children was dark and humid. The power had shut off overnight and the hospital was running on backup generators. The lighting was scarce. There was a small line of kids in blankets lying down. One of the volunteers told us that a gastrointestinal bug had begun to hit a few kids and that they were vomiting. The sound of water could be heard trickling through the building along with the sound of howling wind from the outside.

I was reminded again of my own children. Even as an adult, I was anxious, so I could not imagine how these kids felt. We walked down the hall and began to pass out what we had. Another volunteer told us that they had to get all of the younger kids into a different room because the ceiling was leaking so badly. I glanced in the room and could see the sagging and falling ceiling tiles with a steady stream of water hitting the ground and pooling. My team and I walked into the next room where about 40 3 to 5 year olds sat. This room was also dark with only a few flashlights for illumination. Some of the children were crying and some were laughing. I heard one ask, “Is the storm coming in?” and another ask, “Is the building falling down?”

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We began to pass out stickers again in hope that, maybe for a moment, these kids would forget the uncertainty that surrounded them. We stopped to talk and discuss our favorite sticker characters and during that time, as Florence wailed outside, inside there were smiles.

When we left the crowded hall to see our patients, I was reminded of the importance of compassion not only in medicine but in all areas of our lives. This was the lesson I hoped to pass on to my team. We can make a difference anywhere with our actions, not only in the patient's room.

Compassion for other human beings is a major reason many initially get into medicine. Unfortunately, this can sometimes be muted when we progress through our careers

with the mounting burdens of the job. This situation reminded me that even in the most dire circumstances there can be kindness. Even when we are scared ourselves, we can show compassion.

My team gathered for another family meal that night. We talked about our day and what we had seen. Our conversation drifted between stories of our patients, our families, and our homes that continued face the onslaught of wind and rain outside. We talked about the children and the smiles that the small act of giving a sticker could bring in a time of uncertainty and fear. Reflecting on this lesson reaffirmed for me the importance of our roles as family physicians and the impact we can have on the people

around us. I hope that this lesson stays with my residents as they continue their careers in medicine. Our 6-day lockdown for Hurricane Florence taught me many things about the importance of family medicine, but this lesson sticks out to me as one of the greatest.

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