TMA Hurricane Harvey Survey

In September of 2017, a survey was emailed to 13,696 Texas physicians, both members and nonmembers, from counties listed by the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) as affected by Hurricane Harvey. After four days, responses were received from 524 physicians with practices from the 39 counties designated by FEMA as official disaster areas. The following are highlights from the analysis.

Practice Damages Sustained From Hurricane Harvey (Q1)

As a result of Hurricane Harvey, 65 percent of physicians temporarily closed their practice and 35 percent reduced their hours or services.

Other damages (8 percent) sustained by practices as a result of Hurricane Harvey included air conditioning and power outages, an increased volume of patients after absorbing those unable to visit other practices or hospitals, or fewer patient visits and staff as a result of temporary relocation or inability to safely travel.

- A/C out due to multiple power surges.
- Absorbing other hospitals patients.
- More patients to cover after closure of neighboring hospitals.
- Billing personnel evacuated and can't get back. [We] haven't been able to submit claims for two weeks.
- I was evacuated from my home and couldn't get to work even when building reopened.
- Limited staffing, patients not in town for follow up.
• Patients can’t get to us due to flooding and road closures
• Staff shortage.
• Physician absence due to two partners with flooding.
• [I] will probably combine with another practice in the short term for two to three weeks.
• Other Doctor off icing with us who had damage in his office.
• Damaged roofing shingles, employees not able to return to work, temporary interruption in water, power, internet, telephone lines.
• Fewer patient office visits—decreased income.
• I am a hospitalist. We were limited in the number of patients we could accept and the number of services/consults offered.
• Leaks on ceilings and mild flooding in reception area, nine inches flooding in my home.
• Loss hours due to evacuation only.
• Loss of phones.
• Phone system down.
• Lost all vaccines.

Relocation in County or Zip Code (Q2-3)
Physicians who relocated their practice as a result of Hurricane Harvey are practicing in the same county, but more than a quarter (26 percent) are practicing in a different zip code.

Resume Services (Q4)
Among physicians whose practices experienced reduced hours, services, temporarily closed, or relocated, they estimated it will take them an average of four weeks to return to practice or resume full schedule with some physicians reporting they don’t know or may never return to practice.

Practice Size (Q5)
Physicians were asked the number of physicians in their practice. On average, physicians are in practices with a median of three physicians. Thirty-three percent are in solo practices and 19 percent are in a practice with two to three physicians.
**Additional Comments (Q7)**

Physicians were asked if there was anything else they would like to share. Their comments are as follows:

**Temporary Relocation, Reduction of Staff, and Significant Financial Loss**

- *Is there a way to PLEASE get the insurance companies to work with all of us and understand that billing and appeals may take longer than usual as we work with a reduced number of staff (including our billing and coding staff), we try to put our offices back together and we attempt to retrieve lost information all while taking care of our patients (not to mention our own personal losses).*

- *I am part of a large group practice with multiple office locations. The two offices that I work in were closed for three days during the storm but reopened with full hours. However, one of our offices did sustain extensive flooding and is closed. Patients are being seen temporarily at another office location.*

- *I work for Kelsey-Seybold Clinic. There are two clinics that had to relocate until they can be repaired.*

- *[My] office was flooded to waist level in Port Arthur, total damage to equipment, furniture, patient beds and all medical supplies. I have to relocate to different office in Nederland, TX.*

- *We had to gut our office. We lost all of our equipment including 4D Ultrasound, Colposcope, Her Option, electric exam tables, chairs, computers, server, disposables, everything…. We are relocating, but having to pay 4K a month for a new rental at the hospital professional building, all the while we own our other location that has been devastated. We have flood insurance, but the max for personally is 150K. How do we start over with a limited amount of time to recoup? Also we are carrying salaries for six staff members that have all been devastated too. Thinking hard about quitting the practice of medicine, but that would leave our area vastly under served for obstetrical services. What to do?*

- *Most patients evacuated. Expenses continue yet last two days saw only two and five patients. I do not wish to retire but now may have to and just close the practice.*

- *Completely destroyed my practice and home. Our insurance made zero note of flood exclusion and we have discovered that $500k+ in equipment, plus all of our furniture, has no coverage.*

- *What help: financial, compensation, tax relief or others can be offered to solo practices like mine?*
- My house was destroyed by Harvey. I could not make it to the office due to roads closed from flooding. I have practice interruption insurance but they won't cover me because my office wasn't damaged.
- Affected the revenue for the practice and hence payments for the staff, rent of the practice and other expenses.
- Many physicians in my area were out at least one week, some two, and some still out.
- We've had to take on start-up costs for the temporary location of our practice as our building undergoes construction, resulting in decreased physician wages.
- We had a lot of cancelled procedures due to the hurricane. We live in Corpus Christi and we have many patients from Rockport and Port Aransas that was hit hard by the storm.
- We have four offices, office in Aransas Pass is closed at this time for last two weeks due to structural damage and it will be another eight to 12 weeks before it may be reopened or longer. The office in Sinton and Corpus Christi sustained water damage and roofs are being repaired. We had to store our medical records and medical equipment which did not sustain damage in storage. We still have the two employee salaries from Aransas Pass and expenses without income from that office. We lost our private vaccines which were store at Aransas Care regional medical center hospital which sustained severe damage and the hospital is closed now.

Physician, Staff, or Other Support Interruption
- [I’m] hearing office got damage and water and charts destroyed.
- I work in Lake Charles at FQHC. Clinic has since reopened but I’m unable to safely travel to work due to water on roads, curfews, gas shortage.
- Because we were not under mandatory evacuation, and the building only had minor damage, it is questionable if the business interruption insurance will be triggered to cover the week we were closed.
- E-prescribing was erratic and pharmacies closed.
- Employees unable to come due to flooding. Temporary power interruption.
- Mostly access and employee access issue.
- Office open but will suffer economic injury due to decreased demand.
- Working in MDACC ER and flood gates went up. Reduced ride out staff. Many of our staff still impacted.
- We could not get to the office until Thursday, 9/31/17 due to flooding in Cypress and a lot of our staff could not get to the office. It is taking some of our staff up to three hours to get home due to road closures. Some water damage due to roof leaking but we are working around it. I and another family physician had power and internet within hours of the hurricane so we were able to refill meds but some of the pharmacies flooded and some lost e-prescribing.
- We have leaks in the office roof and home. Electrical surges damaged the equipment. Staff relocated or flooded out.

Loss of Medical Equipment and Supplies
- My office was totally destroyed when the roof went and flooded everything. Ruined five computers, one server, patient charts, all furniture. [I] have to start over after 28 years here…
- Although the medical office did not sustain damage, personal property damage has pulled many physicians from providing patient care. A number of physicians also left their practice to provide donated services to shelters as uncompensated care. This is also a financial burden to the independents. Many of our staff have suffered losses and have had limited work hours which has decreased the volume of patients seen per day. Some have lost power for a week and lost vaccinations, medications and test agents which is not covered by insurance. The building integrity is only 1 part, the professional service and consumables are the parts that are direct costs that most will not be able to recoup.
• I buy and bill many expensive drugs for my rheumatology practice. I am a memorial city affiliated doctor and the hospital system would not allow me to use pharmacy resources to allow me to park my medicines in the refrigerator to safe keep throughout the storm. When Spring Branch hospital was still in business this was never a question. I am very disappointed in the system and need some options as to what to do with refrigerated meds in these situations.

• Loss of power, partial loss of refrigerators/freezers/general cleanup/staff whose homes got flooded. Slight amount of water in the clinic.

• Need to restart from scratch, lost most of furniture and supplies, printer.

• Several roof leaks that need to be fixed.

• We just haven't had phone lines.

Loss of Patients

• Brand new practice saw first patients the week before the hurricane. We have had only a couple of calls to book consultations since the hurricane. My only staff member has been retained for now. Hurricane timing was unhelpful for a new business startup.

• The persistent water from constant reservoir releases is affecting us by flooding our families and preventing traffic from arriving to our office.

• The biggest problem at first was a way to get to the office and pharmacy openings now people won't have the money to see us until they recover.

• I think that people will not be seeing me for a while due to decreased income.

• Our office was not affected but road closures prevented physicians and patients from providing/accessing care.

• I'm in the anesthesia group in Beaumont. I expect a reduction in the volume of elective surgery lasting several months as our patients get their lives back together.

• If a third of the people who lost their homes and evacuated don't return to the area, the recovery will take years. If they do return, it will likely take several months.

• No damage to the office, but bad traffic prevents patients to come to clinic.

• We've had many cancellations and missed appointments. Not only from patient's circumstances but the increased traffic that has made patients either very late or miss their appointments entirely.

• Our number of patients has significantly reduced in one of our satellite clinics due to a lot of families displaced or relocated due to devastation/property damages from Harvey.

• Patients are cancelling or postponing services.

• Today is the first day we have had water since Harvey hit. [Our] office has been closed from 8/28 until today 9/11. [We] only have three patients to see today. [It] will be months until it gets back to normal.

• We are getting back to our normal practice still having issues with patients able to get to office.

• We were back to seeing patients on 09/13/17. The main problem we had was patients were unable to keep appointments because of the heavy flooding.

Loss of Physician Personal Income, Housing, and Personal Items

• Dealing with insurance, FEMA, contractors, etc. is time consuming and can only be done during office hours. I'm trying to get colleagues to cover but I can ill afford and loss of income to pay locums. Since our losses were so great (losing all vehicles and my home of 30 years) it's difficult but I'm trying to juggle 30 balls in the air at once. If I could get a young FP to join me as the heir apparent that would be a dream come true. Until then a doc to help two days a week would be good.
Devastating. I lost my house and car.

Been living in office. Challenging. Mail is way behind.

I'm sure other physicians are in my same situation. With the flooded home I also lost all my clothing as well as my family’s [clothing].

We have had to move out of our home, rent a storage unit, and rent an apartment while our home is being fixed.

Thank you for the e-mail. I work for UTMB. We were able to restart clinic on Sept 1. My house flooded and so I have not returned to work.

The practice was not impacted as much as myself. My home was flooded so I am back to work, but living in a friend's trailer and dealing with fixing up our home.

Ideas for TMA

I hear of local cities still without power or medical care, receiving urgent requests for basic medical supplies such as eye exam trays, bandages, sutures, sterile water, IV kits, IV fluids, etc. Specifically Port Aransas requested these things yesterday. Unable to locate these things as our local hospital has already sent what they can spare. A plane of supplies is due here today and maybe they have some of these things. [I'm] unsure if any state agencies are aware of this. [There is] lots of damage to surrounding communities that will take months to repair and seeing a spike in hospital admissions from hurricane related events. Any help for Port Aransas and other communities would be greatly appreciated. We are in Port Lavaca where damage was not as bad as other nearby places.

TMA could provide information on business interruption insurance (I forgot I had it), how to rescue water logged paper medical records, and water damaged EHR computer prescription, perhaps provide links to services available in big cities. Help with GE: tying insures to waive some hassles involved with documentation, timely filing of claims, etc. during disasters.

Deal with preauthorization by MCO and limitation of specialist especially mental health.

The number one thing that TMA can help doctors deal with is the incredible burden of "Prior Authorization."

Need help with providing medications to displaced persons longer term than one month, to keep them well controlled and reduce unhealthy outcomes.

We had issues with Surescripts deactivating pharmacies that were still active (or possibly returned to active prior to them reactivating them). This led to more work. If others were negatively affected, I would like for TMA to take this to Surescripts.

There is confusion on what would be covered and would not be covered in the event of flood between my various insurance policies even though I have the impression that I have good insurance policies. It almost seems like no one covers for flood damage when it comes to business interruption or rebuilding the office except FEMA and that is limited also.

I was not able to do emergency surgery because senior surgeon was afraid to call staff in. He was unaware that there was an in-house team to perform the surgery. A full complement of surgeons, RN's, and anesthesiologists should be in house to provide care during any emergency. A so-called ride-out team.

I would like more info on any efforts to form a formal Disaster Relief Medical Corps.

In major catastrophe, such as hurricane it would be helpful if TMA educates/engages major medical institutes/directors to ensure patient and staff safety. Some of our colleagues were under pressure to see patients till five pm and staff were expected to clock full day's work. After the event, there seems to be very little interest to change the current practice.
Infrastructure problems have been a problem with allowing patients to communicate. Our phone lines have been totally messed up. The patients have had a hard time reaching the clinic since the phone lines have been down to about 50 customers in the area. Tree should be a way for there to be a message placed on the phone that it is out of order and to call an emergency line (my cell phone). Frontier is my carrier.

Citizens Medical Center in Victoria, TX … did a great job at managing resources and patient care during our hospital’s evacuation and repopulation of its patients. Could TMA put together some sort of recognition or Medical Directors like him and others who answered the call during these trying times?

We are very much open to seeing patients who do not have any coverage, have Medicare, Medicaid, or private insurance. We are here to serve anyone who needs medical help. Please let everyone know this and send them our way.

Physician Stories

I had to shut down because of the impending hurricane. After the hurricane about half my employees and patients could not get to my office. Then my house was placed on mandatory evacuation due to potential flooding. Fortunately neither my office nor home were damaged.

I am self-employed and was scheduled to work in Houston for the four days I was unable to leave Beaumont. We were blocked in by flood waters over all the exits from the city. We do not have potable water at this time--but grateful to have sewer back up and running--it was out for two days - some people still do not have power or water due to the flooding. Many stores are still closed and those open are running at reduced hours. I hear helicopters overhead from 6 in the morning until 8 at night.

I am at a Free Standing ER in Cypress (First Choice). Our community was impacted with flooding. We were able to stay open with two full complements of staff in-house rotating shifts. It proves the value of a decentralized model of emergency medicine. Our sister facilities remained open with one ER physician taking a boat into work and another riding his bike through water for two miles to get to his facility.

I am with UTMB. We had to manage regular hours of service as well as urgent and emergent care, three hospitals. For the most part, we were closed for ambulatory operations from Friday thru the following Wednesday thought urgent cares at some locations were open by Wednesday evening.

We are a free-standing ER in Victoria, TX and were the first medical facility to reopen after Hurricane Harvey. When ALL hospitals were still closed, we were open and serving the community of Victoria.

We are a hospital based ER practice. Due to local flooding and road conditions making it unsafe to transfer patients, we closed four FSED sites for three days. Once roads were passable we reopened the facilities. But we had three to four days with no patients and hence lost revenue.

We did better than most, but still affected through the patients. Spent most of my off time taking food and supplies to the patients as well as evacuating them to safety.

We paid all our staff during this difficult time despite being closed.

Discussion

A significant portion of physicians are still unable to practice due to damages sustained by Hurricane Harvey, either to their medical office or to their personal homes, affecting their ability to work. Moreover, temporary relocation of staff is leading to shortages affecting their normal business operations. Insurers should continue to work with these businesses and suspend billing rules for a minimum of one month, which is the time many of these practices estimated it will take them to resume normal operations.