

New Orleans' Health Care is Ailing: Two Years After Katrina, Lack of Adequate Medical Care is a Growing Problem

■ **CBS**■ In her six years as a nurse practitioner, Scharmaine Lawson has been on medical missions to Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. But she had no idea she'd be doing Third World work in her own hometown.

"Homes that I've passed by all my life, that are gone. No Walgreens, CVS, grocery store, hospitals ... gone," she says.

Lawson's practice consists solely of house calls, or, in most cases, calls to the FEMA trailer parked outside the house. She had 100 patients before Katrina; now she has 500.

One of them is Alice Pierre, 67, who suffers from heart disease, back problems and diabetes.

"My sugar this morning was ... oh my goodness. I have CRS now - Can't Remember Stuff," Pierre says with a laugh.

Almost all of the patients are elderly and in some cases, bedridden. Those who can manage to get to a doctor often can't find one.

How would Lawson describe the state of health care in New Orleans? "It's still on the respirator," she says. "It's still in the ICU."

Two years after Katrina, the health care system in New Orleans is as dilapidated as many of the still-unlivable houses, reports **CBS Evening News anchor and managing editor Katie Couric**. Four hospitals remain closed, thousands of doctors have left, and a quarter of the adult population has no insurance.

"The hospitals in this area are literally hemorrhaging cash, hemorrhaging resources," says Dr. Kevin Jordan, chief medical officer at one of the few remaining hospitals. He says emergency rooms are even more overtaxed today because of the exodus of primary care physicians.

"You can wait anywhere from a month to a month and a half, two months to get a regular appointment, given that that doctor is willing to see you. Because remember, there's that much demand," he gestures with spreading arms, "and that much resource," he adds, closing the gap with his hands.

Only three months ago, the federal government finally agreed to pay \$100 million to fund primary care clinics in New Orleans. But earlier this month, Mayor Ray Nagin went to Capitol Hill and said, "Show me the money."

"I keep hearing about this \$100 million that's been allocated to the Gulf Coast, but I have seen very little of that money in the city of New Orleans," he said.

Until it arrives, there are people like Lawson, who's not just a nurse. In fact, in her current role, she's a social worker, financial adviser, and even a detective. So many medical records were lost or destroyed that she's had to piece together countless patient histories.

"A lot of patients I went out to see didn't have any records, didn't have anything," she said.

And because mental health services are woefully inadequate, some say non-existent, she is a part-time therapist as well.

"You have had some pretty tough problems with depression, haven't you?" **Couric** asks Pierre.

"A lot of things came through my mind. But I had to ask God to forgive me because I just didn't want to be here anymore," she cried.

Why does Lawson do this?

"I'm from here," she says. "And my grandmother who raised me, when she got ill, it was very difficult for her to get out and see a doctor or anyone to help her. So whenever I see little old ladies like Miss Alice, I feel like I'm doing it for her."

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