

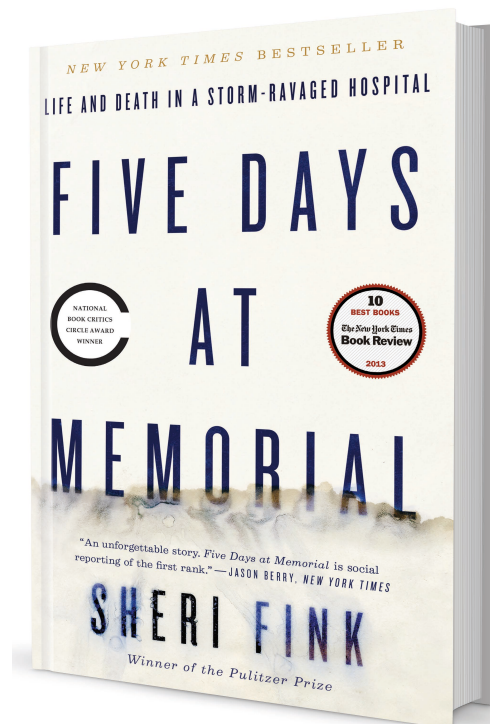
Five days at memorial: life and death in a storm-ravaged hospital

Sheri Fink

David Bassett

4th Year Medical Student
School of Medicine
University of Auckland

David's primary interests are in epidemiology and genetics. Outside of med school you'll find him searching out his next Instagram post and occasionally doing some work as Vice-President External of the New Zealand Medical Students' Association.



Hurricane Katrina still conjures up harrowing images for many people across the world. New Orleans encountered a direct hit from the hurricane which shredded homes and buildings all over the city and submerged the area in murky, polluted water that cut off much of the city's contact with the outside world. In the midst of this disaster zone stood Memorial Medical Centre, full of thousands of patients, staff and shelter-seekers left behind after a rushed evacuation of the city. With gunshots filling the humid air the hospital was left to survive on its own until help could arrive.

This is the story author and physician Sheri Fink explores in *Five Days at Memorial*. At face value one might easily assume that the book is a classic disaster tale of courage and valiant struggle. It soon becomes clear however that Fink is telling a more morally complicated tale.

Fink spends the first portion of the book recounting the night Katrina batters Memorial and captures the sheer ferocity of the storm in her writing. A noticeable lump in one's throat develops reading about how the thick glass windows of the Intensive Care Unit are completely ripped out as the concrete building convulsed in the wind. Through these chapters the professionalism and courage of the Memorial staff is clear, even in the face of a terrifying situation.

The book then turns to the events that followed the storm when record flood waters burst the storm levees, submerging the city and leaving Memorial isolated. Battling sweltering heat, deteriorating sanitary conditions and eventually the loss of backup power the hospital staff begin to see themselves more as disaster survivors than medical professionals. It is the consequences of this change in mentality that provides the real meat to *Five Days at Memorial*. Fink describes how patients were not given their medication or enough water despite adequate supplies of both. One nurse reportedly justifies this on the grounds that they were in "survival mode" and weren't really acting as a hospital. However, the author artfully contrasts this with hospital pharmacists who diligently continued recording prescriptions for painkillers which continued to be given to patients. The overall effect is to poignantly illustrate how often good and bad decisions

can co-exist in people trying to do the right thing, a challenging thought for the idealistic reader.

However, the most disturbing part of the book concerns the euthanasia of patients while the evacuation was finally under way. The book details how it had been decided that some patients were not going to be evacuated due to their do-not-resuscitate status or, in one case, morbid obesity. This occurred despite a steady stream of helicopters available for patient evacuation and the plentiful food, water and medicine at Memorial. Fink describes the damning evidence showing staff used a combination of morphine and midazolam to end of lives of as many as twenty patients who were ill but nonetheless stable. Most striking was one obese but non-critical patient who was smothered to death when massive doses of morphine proved ineffective at ceasing his breathing.

The latter part of the book covers the investigation by the authorities into the events that took place at Memorial. The book details how in the post-Katrina milieu, a team of dogged investigators in the Louisiana Attorney-General's office launch a case against key doctor Dr Anna Pou and two nurses for second-degree murder at Memorial against strong opposition from the medical profession.

In all Fink approaches the events at Memorial with a realist attitude, recognising the courage of many staff in the face of adversity but also painting a cautionary tale of how well-meaning people can act in disturbing ways if their judgement becomes sufficiently impaired by stress and exhaustion. Detailed but never too dense, it is clear that the author has gone to pains to produce an accurate account of what occurred at Memorial during the fateful storm. Perhaps the best sign that *Five Days at Memorial* is an excellent read is the breadth of emotions it evokes in the reader; everything from wonder to anger. Whatever conclusions you draw from the events described in *Five Days at Memorial*, Fink's work undoubtedly highlights the moral complexities of doing good in difficult circumstances and that is a worthwhile lesson for all of us.