For Med Schools, Katrina May Have Silver Lining

New Orleans’ two medical schools, Tulane University and Louisiana State University Health Sciences Center, seem poised for a post-Katrina recovery that may put them on better footing than do Tulane, which has benefited the state, it has more of an uphill battle in an interview.

In late February, the U.S. General Accountability Office estimated that only 456 beds were open at three hospitals in the city. That was down from 2,269 before the storm. (See box.) Outside the city, about 1,528 beds of a total 1,814 had reopens.

Since the hurricane last August, 132 medical faculty members at Tulane and 270 at LSU have lost their jobs. The LSU faculty were furloughed, but most are expected to return. Dr. Larry Hollier, chancellor of the Health Sciences Center, said in an interview.

Because LSU is primarily supported by the state, it has more of an uphill battle than does Tulane, which has benefited from its hospital being owned by HCA Inc., Dr. Beckman said. Physically, 21 of 22 LSU buildings were seriously damaged by the hurricane and subsequent flooding. All of LSU’s teaching facilities were under at least 5 feet of water at some point, according to Dr. Hollier.

In the months after the storm, the university was losing $13 million a month, and at the end of 2005, it was facing a $50 million deficit even after $63 million in cutbacks. In February, LSU received $50 million in federal hurricane relief money, which was distributed by the state-run Louisiana Recovery Authority to help cover resident and faculty salaries.

“I never had any doubt we would keep it going,” Dr. Hollier said. But his job is far from over.

Initially, all seven of LSU’s teaching hospitals were out of commission, leaving many of the school’s residents at loose ends. After the storm, LSU moved its residents to hospitals outside the city and across the state, in particular, to Baton Rouge. Some are now back at work in New Orleans.

But just because LSU found positions for its residents doesn’t mean the school was going to pay for their salaries and upkeep. Under the federal graduate medical education program, schools are required to have affiliation agreements, and LSU does not have any with those new facilities. The school obtained a waiver from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to receive payment for those new slots, and in April, CMS announced its intention to grant the waiver to LSU and all the schools affected by Katrina in an interim final rule. The waiver, which would let schools receive payments retroactive to the storm for residents at any institution, will become final later in the year.

Tulane sought the same waiver, said Dr. Ronald Amedee, dean of graduate medical education. Before the storm, the school had 46 fully accredited programs and 521 residents and fellows in the city.

With the evacuation and closures, 217 were transferred to Texas Medical Center, 200 to other sites in Louisiana, and 110 to facilities across the United States. Before the storm, Tulane had agreements with 13 institutions; residents are now at 91 different hospitals, Dr. Amedee said.

LSU had 802 residents at 12 teaching hospitals around the state before the storm. Most were moved to other hospitals in Louisiana, and 100 have been granted permanent transfers.

On a brighter note, the chaos in New Orleans has not dissuaded prospective residents from seeking residencies at city institutions. Tulane’s 70 residency slots were easily filled; 20 are from the medical school’s 2006 graduating class. Dr. Amedee said the school attracted top-tier candidates. But they were different from those in years past—many have done charity work in developing countries or with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, and many are seeking a dual MD and master’s degree in public health.

This is a group of people that came here and did not see water marks on buildings and debris piled up in the street as a negative—they saw it as a positive.”

I wouldn’t be anywhere else, and I think that’s what the students feel.”

Acute Care in New Orleans: Post Katrina, Just Three Facilities Are Open

Number of Staffed Beds Before Katrina

As of Feb. 22, 2006

Touro Infirmary
Children’s Hospital
Tulane University Hospital and Clinic
Charity and University Hospitals
Methodist Hospital
Memorial Medical Center
New Orleans VA Medical Hospital
Lindy Boggs Medical Center
Source: U.S. General Accountability Office

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Want to Help Out in an Emergency? Here Are Two Ways

By Miriam E. Tucker

Senior Writer

Philadelphia — Two government-affiliated programs provide a way for physicians and other health care professionals to serve as volunteers in the event of a national, regional, or local emergency. Dr. Anand K. Parekh said at the annual meeting of the American College of Physicians.

The Medical Reserve Corps (www.mrc.gov) was formed in 2002 under the auspices of the U.S. Surgeon General’s office. It is a nationwide network of volunteer groups of credentialed and trained volunteers. About 73,000 Medical Reserve Corps volunteers from elsewhere expressed willingness to deploy to the affected areas, and 600 of them actually did so.

Along with the 13 established ESAR-VHP state systems, oth- er 7 state systems were temporarily launched within 2 weeks after the hurricane hit. In all, more than 8,300 health professional volunteers assisted Katrina victims through ESAR-VHP. Dr. Parekh said.

Both of the programs are still evolving, and currently efforts are underway to standardize the credentialing procedures and to increase pre-event training opportunities.

Practice Trends 25

May 2006 • www.cardiologynews.com