

The Most Important Lesson I've Learned this Year

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It is difficult to find the time for introspection regarding the experiences of the past year. Undoubtedly most of my fellow colleagues measure most of their year in intellectual growth, surgical experience, achievement of personal goals or, if lucky, in a perfect mixture of all of the above. Although lessons are plentiful, not all years are the same or provide the same opportunities, and not all lessons become life altering. I live and train in Puerto Rico, the sunny paradise island that is an example of resilience. On September 20, 2017, my home, and urological training ground was devastated by Hurricane Maria, forever altering our history and at least for now our way of life.

Weeks prior to Maria and during a hurricane season that had already taken its toll with Hurricane Harvey in Texas we received indirect effects from hurricane Irma. On the Northern part of the island, where San Juan and our medical training center is located, we were left without electricity for some days, already getting the hint of the real effects a hurricane could have on our island and the struggles of working in a hospital ran by a two decade old generator. It wasn't like Maria, not by a stretch, but we got to experience the vulnerabilities of our medically indigent population and got a glimpse to how our daily training and our degrees were more than just numbers, letters or titles.

Hurricane Maria hit as a category 4 hurricane, at least that's what we are told as most metrics of wind speed were destroyed by the storm's power. It entered through the southeastern part of the island and zigzagged its way out of our area through the northwestern corner, without an inch of land untouched. The twelve hours of howling wind gusts, of rain that gushed through our windows, of screams from desperate neighbors, were horrific, but were nothing compared to the aftermath. Once the winds left, our island was forever changed.

Us doctors, and every able citizen had to muster every ounce of will and experience to stand up and make our country function again. I was the on call resident during the storm, there wasn't a call to be taken or a consult to be answered as there were no telecommunications, no power or water, and for a moment very little hope.

At first patients were slow to arrive, the roads were too obstructed, gas lines were immense, calls could not be made, and the full impact of the catastrophe was still not apparent. Eventually reality set in as patients from all over the island arrived at our institution with diverse complaints and ailments. We as urology residents, many without even having a chance to speak to our family, stepped up and as a team provided not only urological care in the most dire of circumstances, but went back and remembered that our subspecialty training must be cemented on a solid bedrock of general medical knowledge and passion for our profession.

Ureteral stents were placed at the ER. Diabetic patients with no healthy meals, running water, or insulin, began arriving with Fournier's gangrene, and were given the best possible care with a

medical and ancillary staff that set aside their personal needs to care for others. Our ER became a refuge for patients and family members who had lost their entire homes.

Apart from the medicine, I learned the importance of teamwork, and of solidarity. Months after the storm, still with no electricity, fellow residents stepped to help my family and I with ice to keep food semi-refrigerated, or powdered milk for my 2-year-old son. I learned that residency is much more than medical training, and that in the midst of it all I truly had a new family.

During the past year I had many lessons, but without a doubt the most important one of them all was to allow myself to never forget the importance of empathy, and the importance of never losing focus that in our path to become great doctors we must also ensure we become great humans. To not succumb to doubt, to stand up to challenges, to remember the privilege of serving, and to be humble to the complexity of the human condition are marks of a great surgeon, but are also the characteristics of a good citizen. The worst of times were without hesitation the best school. The lessons I got from our darkest days will without a doubt be useful for a lifetime.