

Posted 9/15/2005 11:47 PM

Hope turns to anguish at intensive-care unit

By Robert Davis, USA TODAY

The intensive-care unit at **Lindy Boggs Medical Center in New Orleans** was devastated. Just 48 hours after Hurricane Katrina struck, the hospital's generators had failed. There was no blood for transfusions and very little medication besides morphine.

One floor below the ICU, a plea had been written on a piece of cardboard: "Patients dying; please be respectful."

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What happened on Wednesday, Aug. 31, in the hospital's intensive-care unit — recounted to USA TODAY by the relatives of two transplant patients and two of the last doctors to leave — reveals the horrifying choices and conflicting realities faced by those who stayed, or were left, behind.

For the two critically ill transplant patients and their families, hope quickly turned to horror when they learned that the rescue boats would be evacuating others instead. Ultimately, the two patients did get out after other patients had been evacuated by **firefighters**. They made it out thanks to two family members who refused to leave them and to a doctor who returned to ferry them out himself with a stolen boat.

"The whole thing," Riopelle says, "was just a big nightmare."

Disaster rescue rules

Inside Lindy Boggs that day, doctors began to prepare patients for evacuation, placing cards on each one with one of three letters: "A" meant they could walk out on their own; "B" meant they had medical problems that needed attention; and "C" was condition critical.

Those who got C's — the most desperate for care — were told they would be sent out first.

That all changed, the doctors and family members say, when firefighters from Shreveport, La., arrived and gave hospital staff members new rules for the rescue. The healthiest of the hospital's . . . 120 patients would be evacuated first, the firefighters declared. . .

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When firefighters in boats arrived at the hospital Wednesday afternoon, the plan was to move some of the patients to a dry spot where helicopters could land. **But the Shreveport firefighters said those who were likely to die anyway had to stay behind.**

Worse, "they said there was a good chance they would not show up tomorrow depending on orders from higher up," Ramcharan says. . . .

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Doctors and hospital staffers huddled and decided that several of the patients in the ICU, among . . .

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