To succor the sick: crossroads of US healthcare's future and Charity Hospital's past

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Received: 23 November 2012 / Accepted: 11 September 2013 / Published online: 1 October 2013
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Abstract The ongoing reconstruction of the American medical system draws in the human drama central to the reconstruction of New Orleans' Charity Hospital, mortally wounded by Hurricane Katrina and yet poignantly illustrating the new era decentralizing medical care. Second in the United States only to New York City's Bellevue Hospital in age, the history of Charity Hospital winds through epidemics, wars, physician duels, and hurricanes to the current day. The ongoing political duel between proponents of the Affordable Care Act and the resistant Louisiana state government pits Charity Hospital as the symbolic centerpiece of the question—what does it mean to care for the sick? Various actors in the stage of this acclaimed level one trauma center offer differing responses. The nineteenth century Charity physicians, Drs. Choppin and Foster, offered their position on absolute dedication to one's patients, even at the expense of dueling colleagues for refusing to relinquish ownership of the patient. The Hurricane Katrina-era physicians, Drs. Deblieux and DeBois-Blanc, propose a different response during their five-day battle with no power and waning supplies to keep their stranded patients alive, waiting for rescue. Analyzing the insights at this intersection of human and societal forces, present and past may produce guidance for how to proceed forward rather than regressing, or rather, for how to move deeper into the intersection of the patient and physician.

Keywords Charity Hospital · Health care reform · Hurricane Katrina

Nothing being more certain than death, and nothing more uncertain than its hour...I bequeath to serve in perpetuity to the founding of a hospital for the sick of the City of New Orleans, without anyone being able to change my purpose, and to secure the things necessary to succor the sick.

These 250-year-old lines carved into history's pages by Jean Louis in his Last Will and Testament produced from this French shipbuilder's hands what has come to be known as Hurricane Katrina's most famous victim, Charity Hospital [1].

"Charity" earned its reputation as one of America's oldest continuously operating public hospitals, second only to New York City's Bellevue Hospital in age, which it opened 6 weeks after on May 10, 1736. Criminal, bankrupt, and homeless French figures were among the first to cross Charity's gates, following the French government's failed recruitment efforts to their elite and middle class forced them to recruit for their American colony from their streets and prisons. The pioneering years from 1737 to 1834 saw four sequential Charity's constructed, burned, abandoned, and rebuilt until the Catholic religious order, the Daughters of Charity, escaped a 7-h pirate chase to arrive safely in Louisiana with skilled nursing staff for the hospital. The creation of Tulane University School of Medicine that same year allowed for one of the first physician waves in the southern United States to join the white-robed care-takers.

The hospital halls during the subsequent 100-year stretch carefully kept by the Charity sisters, from whom Charity assumed its current name, would see epidemics, schisms, and two national wars. The continuous thread uniting the involved characters, plots, and graphic images in this unfolding human drama was Jean Louis' mission—

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to succor the sick. Yet disagreements over the meaning of those words resulted in an ironic precursor to the current political duel facing Charity, two acclaimed nineteenth century physicians by the names of Dr. Samuel Choppin and Dr. John Foster who wrestled their fist-fight at their patient's bedside to the hospital yard to be settled by shotgun blasts. Dr. Choppin refused to cede care of his medical student, gravely wounded at a Carnival ball, to the house surgeon, Dr. Foster [2]. Though their shotgun volleys both missed the hearts of the other, the sound of their bullets—fueled by passionate commitment to patients and an unwavering sense of duty to guard them at all costs—fell years later at the feet of Louisiana Governor, Huey P. Long.

The 1932 Long's face-off with Tulane culminated in the expulsion of Charity from Tulane for two years. The expulsion was effected by Dr. Alton Oschner, head of Tulane's Department of Surgery and co-author with Dr. Michael DeBakey of the publication documenting the lung cancer–smoking association [3]. Long arguing that, “Honest boys with good records come out of LSU [Louisiana State University] and can't get into that medical school... We're a-going to fix that”, created LSU School of Medicine 3 months later. His resistance to President Roosevelt's federal financial support of the hospital, however, would be short-lived due to his 1935 assassination on the cold marble floors of the state capitol building, cutting short his presidential plans [4]. Yet a few short years later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt changed his plans for the scheduled meeting with the Daughter of Charity, Sister Stanislaus, who put off the president as she nursed an injured motorcycle policeman. Within months after Roosevelt witnessed the dedicated care of the Charity staff, \$3.6 million in federal funds flowed to the Crescent City to realize Sister Stanislaus' dream of the sixth and current Charity Hospital. 1939 witnessed developments from the mammoth opening of the nation's second largest hospital with 2,680 beds, to Drs. Edgar Hull and Richard Ashman's renowned electrocardiographic association with myocardial

infarctions, to Dr. Rudolph Matas' completion of the first curative aneurysm surgery (Fig. 1).

Throughout the 67 years of caring for the uninsured, the infamous, and everyone in between, Charity Hospital developed a reputation as a celebrated level one trauma center. But the same Mississippi River that first brought seaman Jean Louis who made possible the hospital's existence, also would bring its destruction, Hurricane Katrina. Category 5-force wind and waves in 2005 drove New Orleans into a state of dire, unexpected emergency—one that not even Charity's time-honored emergency room could absorb. Its morgue flooded, the stairwells filled with the deceased, and 200 patients listened to the silent darkness for 5 days as medical staff pumped air for ventilator-dependent patients, praying rescue would come.

The gripping narrative of those days entails two physicians who, following two centuries after Drs. Choppin and Foster' duel over pride and patients, would instead duel over time and resource shortages to help preserve the lives of their 200 stranded patients [5]. Emergency Room director, Dr. Peter Deblieux, rounded as tensions mounted, recalling, “I would go to the nurses and I would go to the residents and go to the patients and say, ‘I promise you. You're going to leave this hospital before I do.’”

He stayed behind to allow the director of Charity's Intensive Care Unit, Dr. Ben DeBoisBlanc, to evacuate the 50 critical care patients with rapidly fading time and supplies. During a particularly memorable moment in the back of a National Guard truck, Dr. DeBoisBlanc noticed one of his patients had suffered a collapse of his left lung. By flashlight, Dr. DeBoisBlanc worked quickly to stab the man's left chest wall and insert a tube, without sedation or analgesics... “It took four people to hold him down while we did that—saved his life.” Of the 50 critical care patients by day five, the two physicians lost only two.

Now nearly a decade since the storm and just down the road from Charity's close predecessor, Bellevue, the death

Fig. 1 Sixth Charity Hospital (<http://tulane.edu/news/tulanian/resuscitation.cfm>)

Fig. 2 Project rendering (http://tulane.edu/news/newwave/083109_medicalcenter.cfm)

of New York City's St. Vincent Hospital echoes the national political storm of who will care for—and pay for—the sick. Despite upheavals in the American medical system that decentralizes hospitals and diffuses medical professionals into communities, New Orleans is following the legacy of Sister Stanislaus with a \$1.2 billion construction of the New Orleans hospital commonly viewed as Charity's successor and neighbor two blocks down Canal Boulevard, the 424-bed University Medical Center (Fig. 2).

Though Drs. DeBoisBlanc and Deblieux challenged Charity's heritage of the dueling Drs. Choppin and Foster, the current tension between President Barack Obama and Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal recalls Charity's historic clash between Huey Long and President Roosevelt. Though unlike Long, Governor Jindal's joint collaboration with LSU/Tulane and his promotion of the hospital as an independent market-orientated venture may move him out of the Kingfish shadow [8]. In November 2012, Governor Jindal reaffirmed Louisiana's opting out of federal funds from the Affordable Care Act (ACA)-based Medicaid expansion in favor of market-based solutions [6]. LA Department of Health and Hospitals Secretary, Bruce Greenstein, maintains that this opting out may point the new Charity Hospital into better financial waters via bypassing the estimated exit of 187,000 patients from higher reimbursing private plans for Medicaid expansion should it have occurred in Louisiana [7]. The coast's swampy foundation, buckling under the weight of the new hospital rapidly under construction for its April 2015 deadline, may just mirror the lack of solid certainty plaguing either side in this national duel.

No stranger to serving not only the poor but also factions as a stage for larger dramas, Charity Hospital's 1939 limestone skeleton thus stands at the crossroads of the traditional and emerging American medical systems, between the towering community hospitals to the community-based medical homes, between a physician and the patient. Superimposed on the gravity of this crossroads, echoes the question from the national debate following Katrina, waged among media outlets about whether New Orleans, let alone its historic hospital, should be rebuilt. The question may have just been answered by the quiet

hands of a local physician, away from the cameras and political figures. He recounts in the storm's immediate aftermath walking amid the dehydrated and demoralized refugees in the New Orleans Convention Center, with nothing but his stethoscope, feeling, "more like a priest than a doctor...I could just put my hands on them, listen, and let them know they are not alone" [9].

Seven years later, as pile drivers continue the relentless resurrection of Charity Hospital under whatever name or shape it eventually will be know—along with that of the American medical system—Jean Louis' Last Will may hum out gently with the Katrina physician, like the lonely jazz trumpet melody on Treme Street—that what may be even more certain than death is the undying desire to let our fellow man that they are not alone. And that may just be the secret of succoring the sick.

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