

Katrina scars tens of thousands psychologically

Laura Eggertson

CMAJ

Tens of thousands of victims of Hurricane Katrina in the US Gulf Coast states are psychologically scarred from the trauma and will need help, says a Canadian emergency physician who travelled to Louisiana as part of Vancouver's Urban Search and Rescue team.



Figure. "Policemen were weeping to see us," said Dr. Mike Flesher. Photo by: Courtesy M. Flesher

"Many of the people that we saw had this vacant stare in their eyes," Dr. Mike Flesher, 44, told *CMAJ*. "They were mentally and physically exhausted."

Flesher was one of 45 team members, including 8 paramedics, who flew to Louisiana from Vancouver on Aug. 31 — 2 days after Katrina struck.

The Canadians were the first emergency responders to arrive at the emergency operations centre for St. Bernard Parish, a New Orleans suburb of 70 000.

The parish president hugged the team leader when they arrived. "Policemen were weeping to see us," says Flesher, head of emergency at Nanaimo Regional General Hospital in BC.

The team was escorted by Louisiana state troopers as they rescued 119 people from their homes, treated about 150 others, and brought many evacuees to safety. The team also resupplied a local medial clinic.

The most serious health conditions involved people with chronic diseases complicated by dehydration, physical exhaustion and heat exhaustion. Others had minor scrapes that were a major concern because of the contaminated water.

Flesher could not do much to treat the psychological problems he saw, except to offer reassurance and some practical help. He hopes trained Red Cross volunteers will be able to offer counselling. "There was really no time for us to spend a lot of time with the victims." The team returned to Canada Sept. 6.

Footnotes

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