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**Saint Elizabeth Community**  
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## David Washington, MD, shares his stormy start to new position in Houston

MARY KORR  
RIMJ MANAGING EDITOR

**DAVID WASHINGTON, MD, MSc**, a Brown University '07 and Alpert Medical School '11 alum, moved from Providence to Houston this July, in the month before Hurricane Harvey hit.



It was not the welcome he and his wife, Emma, and their young daughter could have anticipated when they made the decision to move to Houston after Dave completed his MSc

from the Boston University School of Public Health, and where Emma had secured a position at NASA, in Mission Control as part of the EVA team (the "Space Walk" division).

The *Rhode Island Medical Journal* reached out to Dave in the aftermath of the hurricane and asked him to share his thoughts and experiences.

### What kind of personal and professional impact did this national disaster have on you?

Personally, I was blessed as our home and family were safe. My home only experienced minor electrical damage. However, just around the corner from us, many neighbors lost nearly everything. The contrast between my street and neighborhoods several blocks away is astounding, with large piles of debris still present by the curbs of affected homes and businesses.

Professionally, I was just settling into my new role as an Internal Medicine and Pediatrics physician with the Texas Gulf Coast Medical Group and Bay Area Regional Medical Center when the storm hit. I had been working just 4 weeks.

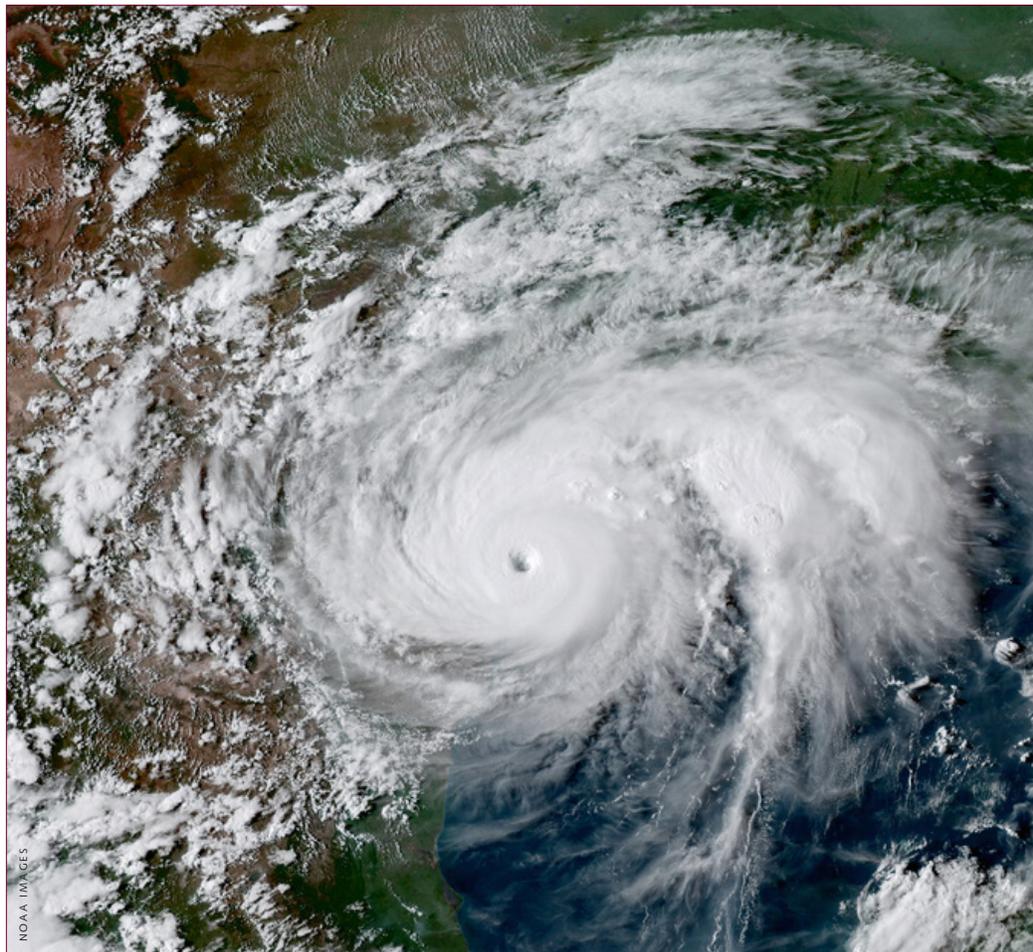
### What type of patient issues have you come across?

Patients have come in with all sorts of issues. We commonly saw traumatic injuries such as broken bones and ankle sprains due to mechanical falls, but also saw issues due to patients losing their chronic medications as a result of the flooding. This was then compounded by many of the pharmacies also being damaged/losing their medications, so patients had no place to fill scripts or obtain medications. Subsequently, patients would present

to the emergency room needing these medications, or in congestive heart failure, or having seizures.

### What was the disruption for practices such as yours? How has this affected physicians' offices – were they closed and for how long?

Many physicians' offices were closed for 3–4 days, forcing patients with dire needs to present to the ER. Even if offices were physically able to be open, it was difficult to staff them as so many health care workers were personally



Hurricane Harvey image captured by NOAA's GOES-16 satellite August 25, 2017.



Flooding in West Houston after the storm.

affected by the storm. This led to those that could get to the office/hospital to work 24–72 hours.

### **What sort of emergency volunteer services did you and physicians you work with provide?**

My hospital's ER, Bay Area Regional Medical Center, did stay open through the storm. I worked several 12–14 hours shifts in the ER. I saw adults and children in an attempt to help take the pressure of the overworked and understaffed ER doctor (there was only one that could get in for several days).

I also set up and ran a "Fast Track" of sorts, taking care of patients triaged as levels 3, 4, and 5. It was very difficult to prescribe medications as there were limited medications in the hospital pharmacy that could be dispensed, and there were not many pharmacies open for several days. Even if pharmacies were open, they did not have a fully-stocked formulary, so we had to make due with what was available.

One of the hardest hit patient groups were those with end-stage renal disease on dialysis. Many came in having missed their dialysis for anywhere from 3–5 days. They were feeling nauseous, weak, and were quite frightened. Many had to sleep overnight in the hospital ER or in the waiting room, until they were at least able to set up a makeshift dialysis center in the ICU. This was for 1–2 days until other dialysis centers opened and patients could be redirected.

Another problem we had was that our ER was seeing double the usual volume with half the staff, and we did not have enough staff to operate many medical floors, which meant patients that would normally have been quickly admitted to the floor had to stay in the ER. This also occurred for 1–2 days until enough staff could get in to work. So many health care workers were affected by the storm and could not get in that our CEO had to fly staff from his home state New Jersey, to help the hospital function.

### **How would you describe the aftermath of the storm on the city and the patients you have come into contact with?**

What is interesting to me is this storm was unique and hit everyone, rich and poor, old and young. I get the sense from Houstonians that have lived through other storms and floods that this was particularly unique about Hurricane Harvey. Places that don't usually flood, did this time. This took many people and businesses off guard, making the clean-up now much worse. Many did not have flood insurance because they were not in a certified flood plain. The shock alone was crippling to many.

Almost two weeks after Hurricane Harvey, its effects are still ever present. Many of my patients have lost everything, and are dealing with scrapes and coughs related to trying to clear out what is left of their homes (and those are the lucky ones).

Depression and anxiety underscore many chief complaints. I have been trying to be more mindful during this time in my visits with patients, keeping quiet to allow them to say what is on their minds. Patients are extremely grateful for this. I think it affords them some modicum of control over what is, otherwise, a particularly chaotic time.

I do feel sad for this city I was just getting to know. My wife and I do, however, feel uniquely bonded to the Houston area now, and, while still very much Rhode Islanders at heart, are proud to be a part of this community. There are many incredible individuals that have donated countless hours and resources for neighbors and strangers alike. I have heard many people down here say in response to being asked why they put their own safety in jeopardy to help another: "Because that's what we do here!"

I'll leave with one of my favorite encounters over the past two weeks. I was seeing a mother and her 13-year-old and 6-year-old sons. They had lost all their possessions and home due to flooding and were living in a shelter. When I entered the room, the young one ran up to me and said with complete sincerity, "Hey doctor, I don't know if you know this, but, like the WHOLE world flooded and now I get to wear my pajamas all day!!!" Leave it to children to find a silver lining amidst the aftermath of turbid flood waters. ❖