

What's the Point?

Acupuncturists providing free care to Katrina survivors get pricked by some Louisiana bureaucrats. By Leslie Turk

The thousands of Hurricane Katrina survivors and relief workers who got free acupuncture from licensed out-of-state practitioners are exceptionally grateful for the kindness of strangers. But now the state is changing the rules on the acupuncture group, known as Acupuncturists Without Borders, a move that has halted this health care for those still reeling from the devastation of the biggest natural disaster in the nation's history.

In fact, it was Hurricane Katrina that gave rise to the non-profit humanitarian group AWB, according to AWB founder Diana Fried, a licensed acupuncturist from New Mexico.

While AWB was readying its troops for work in the state, the group was also being schooled in Louisiana red tape, no doubt exacerbated post-Katrina. "It took a month trying to figure out if [we] could come here," Fried says. "We contacted DHH, the Louisiana Board of Medical Examiners. We tried contacting everybody."

Unbeknownst to AWB, Gov. Kathleen Blanco had already paved the way for medical personnel from around the country to aid the state. "We found out about the governor's Executive Order through a third party," says John MacDonald, a retired Pennsylvania lawyer and AWB's director of policy, planning and budget. "[It] effectively suspended Louisiana licensing laws and regulations for out-of-state medical personnel with an unrestricted license in their home state."

In large part because of the assistance and resources offered by Lafayette acupuncturist John Hebert, the group's first stop in October 2005 was the Lafayette Cajundome. In most states, acupuncturists practice as full-fledged professionals, but Louisiana practitioners like Hebert (who is licensed in California) are recognized as "acupuncturists' assistants." Only a licensed medical doctor can be called an "acupuncturist" in Louisiana; others must practice under the supervision of a physician.

After a week in Lafayette, AWB headed into hurricane ravaged New Orleans. "We wanted to go where we could have the most impact," Fried says. The group has worked at various locales in and around the city, living at rustic Algiers



AWB founder Diana Fried advertises her group's free acupuncture treatments at an Algiers clinic.



An out-of-state acupuncturist helps relieve Cajundome volunteers' stress.

camp facilities run by FEMA. More than 48 licensed acupuncturists from across the country have volunteered, treating more than 4,000 hurricane victims, relief workers and emergency respondents with what AWB calls "community acupuncture."

An ancient Chinese form, acupuncture uses tiny needles that stimulate acupoints in the body to relieve pain or discomfort and promote healing. Fried says treatments were limited to storm-related health problems, versus chronic or long-term illness often addressed by acupuncturists. "It's specifically focused on stress, trauma, fatigue and insomnia," she says. Fully clothed patients sit upright while the needles are painlessly inserted into specific areas around the ear.

The response was overwhelming until the group got the wind knocked out of its sails with a letter dated Feb. 17 from the Louisiana State Board of Medical Examiners. The letter was a denial of AWB's Dec. 28 request to be included in any extensions of the governor's Executive Order, set to expire Dec. 30.

MacDonald questions the board's motivation for withholding its decision for so long.

Saying AWB must demonstrate to DHH that existing acupuncturists and acupuncturists' assistants living in the New Orleans area are not meeting the demand for acupuncture, the board's letter had the effect of reinstating Louisiana's law requiring an on-site, supervising physician. In contrast, all other medical professionals were granted an extension by DHH on Dec. 30, allowing for a 60-day "permission to practice" exemption.

DHH spokesman Bob Johannessen insists acupuncturists are included in the 60-day extension but says the group must comply with state law, which AWB contends is the issue that unfairly singles acupuncturists out. "How would full-fledged MDs from other states feel if they were told that if you want to volunteer in Louisiana you are only a physician's assistant?" asks MacDonald. "They would rightly consider it an outrage."

Some in New Orleans are left wonder-

ing why the state is turning down assistance at a time when health resources in the Crescent City are so strained. Georgia Ross, an artist who owns a bed-and-breakfast on Magazine Street, suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, including depression, nightmares and lack of energy. Ross was already down with a back injury she sustained bringing in patio furniture before the storm and was told she needed surgery for a herniated disc. "I didn't have money for surgery," says Ross, who has no medical insurance. Instead, she opted for acupuncture.

"I am free of pain and my attitude is much better," says the spirited 56-year-old. Ross says it's unrealistic to think physicians would have the time to oversee the work of AWB volunteers, who are treating some of New Orleans' most impoverished areas. "Right now we have virtually no medical care in this city," Ross maintains. "And they are telling these volunteers they can't put a little filament in somebody's skin. It just makes me so mad."

AWB, however, isn't giving up. The group has gathered numerous testimonials, including some from FEMA, Red Cross and Habitat for Humanity workers, and is asking supporters to call DHH and the Louisiana Board of Medical Examiners. It's also rallying support through its Web site, www.acuwithoutborders.org.

Late last week, MacDonald, who had finally gotten a phone call through to DHH, began sounding a bit more optimistic. "DHH officials have shown a willingness to work with us," he says.

While the 60-day extension expired at the end of February, Fried believes the need for medical care is still so urgent that additional extensions will be granted. "The reason we are so determined is because the experience has touched our hearts," she says. "We have treated people who are beyond grateful."

For locals like Hebert, the satisfaction of helping AWB get a foothold in the state is now tempered by the unwarranted struggles. "These people are volunteers coming from across the country," says Hebert, who has practiced in Lafayette for the past nine years. "It's embarrassing." ■■■

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