

Finding Supplies

When dawn broke on Tuesday, August 30, it was clear that everything was completely different. I looked out the window to discover that the hotel was surrounded by three to five feet of water, and there was water filling most of Canal Street. There was an overhead announcement that anyone who needed medical care should report to the bar. I knew we were in for a medical crisis and that leaving was out of the question: real soldiers don't run from fighting, and real doctors don't run from sick people. I let them know that I was willing to help in any way I could, but I was glad to discover that there had been an HIV conference at the hotel, so there were several infectious disease specialists present; there was also a family practitioner, a pharmacist, a physician's assistant, and an obstetrician-gynecologist.

Some members of this ad hoc team had drawn up a list of drugs and supplies that we might need. But I had looked outside and talked to the police, and I knew that looting had begun and many people were armed. We were not going to have the chance to selectively look through the pharmacy and get what we thought we needed. We had to get in there, get as much as we could, and get out quickly.

So with hotel security at the watch, the pharmacist, the police officers, the family practice physician, and I waded across Canal Street in thigh-deep water to the drugstore. With their weapons drawn, officers Jeff Jacob and Tommy Redmann kept the looters out. The door had already been smashed. We went in with several other police officers. It was dark and full of water, it stank, and there were items floating everywhere. The pharmacy was locked, but our pharmacist figured out how to smash through a plastic window divider and climb in. Then he figured out how the shelves were organized and found a refrigerator containing some insulin. I tried to stuff things into my pockets but soon realized that it was futile. Someone found trash bags, and we were in business.

As fast as we could, we grabbed things off the shelves and filled the bags, trying to keep them high and dry. All the while, we were calling out items for the officers to find in the store — diapers, Depends, Ensure, bandages. They kept saying, "Hurry, hurry! We don't have much more time." I was the last to leave. Officer Jacob, who was guarding the door, asked whether I'd gotten everything I needed. I said, "There's a lot more back there we could probably use, but they said we

don't have time." He said, "You got time — go get what you need."

I turned and looked at the mob outside, and one guy said to me, "You're just going to take everything and leave nothing for us." I told him, "I am a doctor. I just need to get a few more medicines to take care of some sick people, and you can have everything else." Maybe it was my imagination, but the crowd seemed to relax.

I went back into the pharmacy, and an officer and I filled trash bags with the special plastic containers that pharmacies use to store their most commonly dispensed drugs. I figured that, common things being common, this was the best stuff to take. I then muled three bags back across the street, praying that they wouldn't break. When I got back on dry land, I dropped all the bags and almost collapsed.

Exhausted and filthy, I went upstairs to change clothes and try to clean off. I realized that raw sewage had gotten into my mouth and eyes. I went back down to the "clinic" and found that the pharmacist had already organized the lot. I found some Cipro and got myself a handful for immediate and future use.

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