Surgery by flashlight as Joplin team operates through tornado

It started out as a typical Sunday morning on call—a 7:30 am C-section, home for a nap, then a call-back at 3 pm for orthopedic cases. But that Sunday, May 22, 2011, turned out to be anything but typical for Staci Perry, a surgical technologist at St John’s Regional Medical Center in Joplin, Missouri.

When the devastating E-5 tornado hit that afternoon, a surgical team in OR 2 was about half way through an incision and drainage (I & D) on a female patient, and Perry was helping to set up another room for the next case. As a member of the call team, she was there to assist the RN and ST who covered the weekends with 12-hour shifts.

As Perry walked through a back hallway to get a piece of equipment, she heard the loudspeaker call out, “Execute Condition Gray,” the hospital’s alert for bad weather. Looking out the windows on one side of the hallway, she saw rain swirling in what looked like “a bunch of little tornados.” Then out of the corner of her eye she “saw something much larger.”

Again the loudspeaker announced “Execute Condition Gray,” and glass started cracking in front of her.

As Perry ran back into the OR to alert the rest of the team, the walls started vibrating, they felt intense pressure in their ears, and the lights went out. All of the windows in the hallway where she had just been standing had blown in. Rain, glass, and debris were blowing into the ORs.

The physician assistant who was assisting the surgeon broke scrub and put his weight against the big wooden OR door that was threatening to blow in. As he struggled to hold it closed, leaves, rain, and bits of glass blew in under the door and around the edges. Meanwhile, Perry and the RN circulator fought to keep the OR door leading to the substerile room closed.

Though the worst of the storm lasted only about 30 seconds, it felt like “an eternity,” Perry told OR Manager.

Focused on the patient

Throughout, she says, the surgeon, anesthesiologist, and scrub tech kept their focus on the patient and procedure. “They were amazing,” she adds.

When the lights went out, the emergency generator went on and then back off after about 5 minutes. The only lighting was from emergency lights on the walls.

Perry gathered all of the flashlights she could find. She and the rest of the team held the flashlights so the surgeon could finish the case, the anesthesiologist could extubate the patient, and they could see to leave the OR.

By that time, a patient care specialist made his way out of the damaged recovery room to see if they were okay and went to look for a surface to transport the patient on. Finding a cart in the preop area, he maneuvered it through the debris-filled department. The team transported the patient to the preop area, which was damaged but usable.

“We grabbed blankets out of the warmer, which were still warm, piled them on the
patient, and then put a lap sheet over the blankets to protect her from any falling debris,” Perry says.

**Help arrives**

Shortly after the team arrived in preop, firefighters came in. Patients were brought to the preop area from the heavily damaged emergency room because the preop area was in the inner part of the hospital.

“Minutes after the tornado hit, another surgeon came to the OR to make sure we were OK and help transport patients out. As soon as we got to the parking lot, other surgeons just started showing up to help us,” Perry says.

They were told to evacuate the building quickly because it might explode.

The I & D patient, who was awake and talking when they got her outside to the parking lot, was transferred by ambulance to another hospital.

Ambulances had already arrived to transport patients 20 blocks to the Memorial Hall event center where a triage unit was set up. Citizens offered their trucks to help transport patients.

Perry helped put 3 patients in the back of a truck and another 3 into a truck’s extended cab. Then she got in with the driver and his wife.

“We honked our horn, and I had my head out of the window yelling, ‘We have patients, let us through.’ We got through to Memorial Hall,” says Perry.

It took only 90 minutes to get all of the patients and employees out of the hospital to safety.

Perry got home at 2:30 am. “It was an experience I don’t ever want to go through again,” she says.

Many employees lost or had damage to their homes. Everyone working at the hospital when the tornado hit lost their automobiles, Perry says.
St John’s parent, the Sisters of Mercy Health System, reported that 5 patients and 1 visitor were killed at the hospital, and a number of caregivers were injured. The death toll from the storm, which cut a swath at least 7 miles long through the city, stood at 134 on June 1. The 270-bed hospital was severely damaged.

St John’s CEO and president pledged the hospital will rebuild. Most of the patients injured in the tornado were being cared for at neighboring hospitals. But within just one week of the tornado, a 60-bed mobile hospital that includes ORs, an emergency room, imaging, lab, and inpatient care was set up on the hospital grounds. The facility opened Sunday, May 29.

—Judith M. Mathias, MA, RN

More on the tornado and aftermath are at www.mercy.net.