



GENERAL ACUPUNCTURE

Acupuncturists Respond to Emergency in San Diego

Tina Beychok

In late October 2007, more than 500,000 San Diego county residents were forced to evacuate their homes due to raging wildfires. Officials estimated that one in three houses in San Diego County was evacuated. Many of these residents sought shelter at evacuation centers across the county. The largest of these centers was at Qualcomm Stadium, home of the city's professional football team (the Chargers), where about 12,000 went to wait for the fires to be brought under control.

Many of these evacuees experienced extreme stress and anxiety as they wondered whether they would even have a home to which they could return. Fortunately, students, alumni and faculty from the Pacific College of Oriental Medicine (PCOM) were among those on hand to provide massage and acupuncture treatments.



PCOM volunteers provided acupuncture and massage to evacuees.

Comparisons to the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans were inevitable. However, according to Ryan Altman, founder and executive director of the Alternative Healing Network, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting the use and accessibility of integrative healing, this environment was vastly different. Many evacuees remembered horrific stories of theft, violence and inhumane living conditions from the New Orleans Superdome. However, Altman, whose group coordinated volunteers at Qualcomm, as well as other evacuation sites, stated that the evacuees were greeted with "an abundance of food donations, Internet connections, multiple stages with live music, and even free Chinese medical treatments."



Despite many depictions in the national media of Qualcomm being turned into a "spa" for evacuees, Altman hastened to add that this was not the case. "These aren't 'spa treatments,' but therapeutic, medical services, just like any other health care provider would offer. These people have been displaced, sleeping on cots, on the cement, in chairs, in whatever make-shift bed they can find. It definitely leads to muscle pain, additional stress, nerve impingement, digestive disorders, basically everything we're seeing here."

Working side by side with Acupuncturists Without Borders and Alternative Healing Network, PCOM volunteers provided thousands of treatments between Oct. 23 and Oct. 26, when Qualcomm finally closed its doors and the San Diego Red Cross took over caring for the remaining evacuees. Treatments also were made available for those who volunteered their time to aid the relief effort including nurses and EMTs. Needles and supplies were donated by Helio Medical Supply and Bodywork Emporium.

"The school and clinic were open for the week," explained Lynda Harvey, clinical director for PCOM. "We had all these students wanting to do shifts, so when Geoff Barrett, director of community outreach for Alternative Healing Network, and Erin Raskin (PCOM clinic supervisor) got us in the door at Qualcomm, we sent our shifts to the site instead of the school clinic." PCOM also sent over additional supplies and volunteers.

PCOM student Julia Sanfilippo saw a noticeable difference in the evacuees and volunteers that she treated. "People seem much more relaxed. I've treated more than 10 people in the first few hours I've

been here and in each patient, I think treatment was effective for them."

One evacuee, Denise Gaitan, took advantage of the offered treatments. "I feel really relaxed now," she said. "It's a very tough time, and this is a great momentary relief from a tense situation."

Cynthia Jackson, who volunteered her time at the kids' stations, sought out acupuncture for stress relief and high blood pressure. "I have a whole new outlook," said Jackson. "Julia did a wonderful, gentle job and handled me with a lot of love. I definitely plan on coming to the clinic for acupuncture."

However, once Qualcomm was no longer taking evacuees, the volunteers looked for other opportunities. "Once Qualcomm closed, our volunteers kept asking, 'what can we do now?'" said Barrett. "We went all over the county looking for places to help. We were denied access at Camp Pendleton in North County, Camp Kit Carson (the Ramona Firefighter staging area) and at the Del Mar Fairgrounds." They were finally given a place to set up across the street from the Gillespie Field Staging Area in Santee, Calif. PCOM faculty member Bob Johnson also helped organize alumni and students to provide acupuncture treatments at the firefighters' checkpoint.

Many of the firefighters, although having no compunction about getting up close and personal with the blazing hillsides, were not so certain about doing the same with acupuncture needles. Barrett noted, "A lot of the staff volunteers and firefighters were coming to us because their buddies dared them to. Then we saw them coming back every day after that and then showing their friends that it was actually helping."

In total, more than 1,200 evacuees, volunteers and firefighters were treated with acupuncture, massage, homeopathy and healing touch at Qualcomm, Gillespie Field and the Ramona evacuation center. In looking back at the entire experience, Altman noted, "The selfless spirit showed by the volunteers and firefighters was contagious and everyone on site enjoyed the inclusive healing environments we helped to create."

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