

Blog

An Emergency Physician Remembers September 11, 2001

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This year marks the 15th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Thousands of first responders, clinicians and civilians displayed heroism and selfless duty in the hours, days and weeks following the attacks. This is an emergency physician's account of how he answered the call to service, because that's what physicians do.

By Maulik Trivedi, MD, FACEP

In September 2001, I was living in an apartment in Jersey City, N.J., directly across from the World Trade Center. I have to admit that my view was pretty spectacular – it was one of the reasons I took the apartment.



On the morning of September 11, still groggy from my prior shift, I was awakened by repeated phone calls. I finally answered and a friend told me to look out my window, that the World Trade Center was on fire. It was a beautiful sunny day and as I gazed from the balcony, I hadn't even noticed that one tower had already collapsed. The smoke was thick and I was focused on trying to figure out what possibly could have happened.

There was a frantic knock on my door. It was my neighbor, whose wife worked in one of the towers. He couldn't get in touch with her. As we were talking and looking, the other tower collapsed. Very soon after, an alarm alerted us that our building was being evacuated.

I didn't have much time to gather my belongings, or to think. Still wearing my scrubs from the night before, I walked down the stairs of my building, still trying to process what was happening. An officer noticed me on the street and asked me if I was a doctor. I followed him to a police boat in the harbor, and we sped across the Hudson River toward lower Manhattan.

When we docked, he directed me toward the smoke and chaos, and I wound my way through damaged buildings and a sea of debris in the street. I stopped an ambulance and jumped into the back of the rig, but we could only get so far before we had to start walking again. The smoke and ash in the air was so thick. Papers were blowing around, people were lost, running around, yelling and crying in this bizarre gray landscape. It was surreal. Despite masks, we

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couldn't breathe well, and at this point I still had no idea what exactly had happened.

We eventually established a makeshift "clinic" at the base of where the towers stood, and that's where we prepped to receive the countless trauma cases we were anticipating. We treated a lot of minor wounds, lacerations, a few broken bones and a lot of breathing issues ... but we never saw the acute patients that we were expecting. People prepared makeshift stretchers and splints with items we could find, we set up a morgue, called for blood to be delivered, and essentially prepared for the worst. In the end, the majority of our patients were first responders.

I remember hearing fighter jets flying overhead, and then a siren sounded and another building close by started to topple. We had to run and take cover as it collapsed. We saw buildings and businesses in a complete state of rubble. I remember seeing a bank blown wide open and I could see the vault door bent in half. Our mobile phones wouldn't work, so that added to the confusion and intensity of the situation. Later that afternoon someone told us more details about the other attacks, and it all started sinking in.

We searched damaged buildings for survivors and marked the doors as we moved on. In the offices, it looked like time had stopped; people had fled and just left everything the way it was. At one point I led a photographer for The New York Times through the grounds and through empty offices.

We stayed late into the night, searching the debris, hoping to find some survivors. Around 3 a.m., a civilian with a yacht offered to bring me and several others across the river to New Jersey. He didn't think twice about having a bunch of random people covered in thick dust, dirt and blood trample all over his beautiful ship. I distinctly recall the trip because he offered all of us beers.

I had to work the next day, Sept. 12, and I showed up for my shift quite exhausted. One of the other ED doctors irrigated my eyes as I had a lot of small fragments that I couldn't remove. I remember taking care of an elderly World War II veteran that day who told me "It was like Pearl Harbor all over again."

Fifteen years later, the whole experience is still seared into my memory. I haven't been to the national September 11 Memorial, but I think I will - someday.

People still ask about that day and if I was scared and how I prepared to go there, and in hindsight, I surely was scared. I think it's not that complex or profound: I'm a physician, an ER physician, and people needed help. It's just what we do.



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Comments

Jeff

Powerful words, brother, and it humbles me to know you as a friend.

9/12/2016 5:22:32 PM

Dan Rizzo

Thank you for posting this Maulik...my wife was on the 77th floor of the north tower. By Gods grace and the help of a stranger(at the time), she got out 90 seconds before the building came down on top of them. Thankfully they were huddled inside an electronics store and survived. She still struggles with her PTSD to this day, but she is the strongest woman I have ever met, and never gives up the fight. The scars will always be there, and some of the pain may never be totally alleviated, but all we can do is look ahead and be thankful for what we have. So many people lost more than we can ever imagine. Thank you again for sharing this and for all you did during that horrible time.

9/9/2016 10:16:56 PM
