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[Matt cartoon](#)

[Obituaries](#)

[Opinion](#)

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[Weblogs](#)

[Week at a glance](#)

[Your view](#)

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## 'I could have saved her life but was denied permission'

By Toby Harnden in New Orleans  
(Filed: 18/09/2005)

Refugees from New Orleans died after private doctors were ordered to stop giving treatment because they were not covered by United States government medical liability insurance, according to two American surgeons.

Mark N Perlmutter, an orthopaedic surgeon from Pennsylvania, was told by a senior US Coast Guard officer representing the embattled Federal Emergency Management Agency (Fema) that he must leave the overstretched disaster relief hospital at New Orleans airport.

He had applied a chest compression after a female patient died and was turning to another critically ill woman at the triage reception area on the airport tarmac when he was summoned to see Capt Art French, the doctor in charge of the hospital.

"The other lady was in equally bad shape and I was not able to work on her. When I went back afterward to get my supplies they were taking her body to a store where the deceased were being placed.

"It's absolutely possible I would have saved her life but I was denied permission to try." An estimated 20 to 30 patients died at the temporary hospital that day.

Dr Perlmutter arrived with Clark Gerhart, a surgeon colleague, and Alison Torrens, from Co Antrim, a medical student at Aberdeen University. All three had volunteered their services free of charge.

It was five days after Hurricane Katrina had struck but all three were struck by the sense of chaos. "It was like something out of a film," said Miss Torrens. "I couldn't believe I was in the middle of America. There were people lying on the luggage racks. Every single patient was in a pool of urine or had soiled themselves."

The surgeons said that the medical staff there had welcomed their arrival and needed trained doctors.

"They were just swamped," said Dr Gerhart. The surgeons, however, were told they could not work there without Fema credentials, which could not be issued even though they had their medical licences with them.

"[Capt French's] words were, 'We don't have any way to do credentialing and no way to ensure tort liability coverage'. How any one could utter those words in the middle of a catastrophe I do not know."

Dr Perlmutter said that he begged to be allowed to work



Dr Perlmutter: turned away while helping survivors

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until he could be relieved by a Fema doctor but was told that this was not possible.

Kim Pease, a Fema spokesman, said: "The volunteer doctor [Dr Perlmutter] was not a credentialed Fema physician and, thus, was subject to law enforcement rules in a disaster area."

The three were flown back to Baton Rouge in another Black Hawk and were then swiftly given credentials by the Louisiana state authorities. They spent four days treating hundreds of patients.

The surgeons, who worked at 9/11, were left with a sense of frustration that they had been blocked by what seemed to be petty bureaucracy.

"Could we have saved any of those lives?" asked Dr Gerhart. "We'd certainly like to have tried."

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