



# How Medical Practices Survive Hurricane Season

By Brian Foster

**A**fter Hurricane Wilma struck on Monday, October 24th, 2005, one Palm Beach County pediatrician was lucky enough to get his power back a week after the storm. But the building where his billing service was located had no power, and the landlord locked out tenants for another week. So the doctor spent a week seeing patients amid chaos and confusion with no support from his billing service and no real way to reach them.

Hurricane Wilma was the worst storm in years. The electricity was out for two full weeks across three counties, even longer in some neighborhoods.

Following Wilma, I spoke with doctors everywhere who struggled with staff, computer systems, sick patients and their own personal issues. Unfortunately, they also struggled with their ill-prepared billing services or their sub-par practice management software.

At our company we had a well-rehearsed disaster plan, plus a team of people that took care of everything from fetching gas and food to planning parties for the end of the day to keep morale high.

I spent most of those two weeks after the storm driving across South Florida to meet with physicians. I dodged a lot of downed street lights and uprooted trees. What I saw was that, even after a storm like Wilma, medical practices across South Florida were focused on “getting back to normal” as quickly as possible.

In hard-hit Plantation, Pembroke Pines and Fort Lauderdale, where many offices were without electricity a solid two weeks, physicians and staffs worked hard behind the scenes to ensure a strong return. Doctors in Deerfield, Boca and Delray were looking at the same mess of downed trees, fallen power lines and missing traffic lights as their counterparts in North Miami Beach, South Miami and Kendall.

But, whatever city the practices were in, I heard the same horror stories about being abandoned by local billing services, or getting no real hands-on help from practice management software companies.

Once the power came back, many physicians squeezed in patients – scheduling office hours on that Friday afternoon when they used to take off early, or even opening on Saturdays – in order to treat their patients.

Hurricane Wilma was a reality-check for practices throughout Florida. Revenue cycle management companies that provide medical offices with Internet-based practice management software (ASP model), billing and collection services and other support services did well under these circumstances versus small mom-and-pop billing services. These companies promise to provide services and support during and immediately following a storm like Wilma.

## **Lessons Learned**

There will be another hurricane like Wilma – hopefully not for a long time. Your practice's goals following the next storm are clear: get back to your patients, provide high-quality care, get the billing out cleanly and quickly, continue to keep careful patient records, and maintain cash flow. Here are a few lessons learned:

### **If you're using a billing service, make sure your billing service has a management hierarchy**

Your vendor should have personnel with clear responsibilities to the clients and defined lines of communications. Be wary of vendors where the owner is also your main point of contact within the company, or worse, when that person also seems to be doing most of the work for your practice. After a storm, chances are this person will not be focused on your particular needs; they'll be focused on theirs.

### **Make sure your vendor has a Business Continuity Plan**

Power outages were widespread after Wilma. What happens if power returns to your medical office, but your vendor's place of business is without power for another week? What plans are in place for the company to continue serving you?

## **The Internet is reliable**

The electricity grid is at greater risk than Internet connectivity. Is your billing service using the web to support you and your practice? Are you or your office staff prepared to take advantage of the Internet, perhaps from a remote site like an Office Manager's home, to get the practice back up and running?

## **Make sure your patient and practice financial data is safe**

The fact is, your office is not designed to protect computers or data. Lost financial data will ruin a practice, so you should consider outsourcing your "mission critical" information, such as patient records and financial data. One doctor told me, "I turned off the server before the storm, but when I came back to the office, it wouldn't turn back on!"

## **Is your vendor set up to help you in the immediate hours after the storm?**

After a big storm like Wilma, everyone is focused on "getting back to normal", even though conditions may not be optimal (ie, power or phone is out, employees impacted, traffic nightmares). Is their staff large enough and professional enough to lend your practice a hand?

## **Make sure your vendor has defined "mission critical" needs for your practice.**

In the immediate days after a storm, "mission critical" to your practice is your appointment schedule and patient superbills. Paper printouts will allow you to see patients even without electricity. How can your vendor help you with these items? Without them, your office can't run effectively, so make sure your vendor is there to support you.

## **Does your office or medical building have a generator?**

For personal use, a small generator (5 KW) and 10 gallons of gas per day is enough to power a 1-2 doctor office (computer, a few lights, a small fridge). If you can, buy one now and be prepared.

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