



## Chiropractic in the Eye of the Storm

AN INTERVIEW WITH KATRINA SURVIVOR ROBERT LIZANA, DC (PART 1 OF 2)

Michael Devitt

By most accounts, Dr. Robert Lizana had it all - a loving wife, a beautiful family, a thriving practice, respect among his peers, and a position as the team chiropractor for the National Football League's New Orleans Saints.

Then came Hurricane Katrina.

In the span of a few days in August/September 2005, Dr. Lizana lost a large portion of what he had worked so hard for in the previous two-plus decades. His house and his 5,500 square-foot office, both only a short drive from the Superdome, were essentially destroyed in the catastrophic aftermath of Katrina, the result of a failed levee system that left significant parts of New Orleans underwater for days, and caused death and destruction on a scale never before seen in the United States.

In the almost six months since Hurricane Katrina struck, life has slowly begun to return to normal for at least some of the residents of the Gulf Coast. Not so for the several hundred doctors of chiropractic who were practicing in Louisiana, Mississippi and other areas affected by the hurricane. For most of them, life continues to be a struggle, as they wage their own personal battles to rebuild their practices and help revive their communities.



In this exclusive two-part interview with *Dynamic Chiropractic*, Dr. Lizana tells us what it was like to be in the center of one of the worst disasters in the nation's history. In addition to detailing his experiences treating other health care providers, police officers and member of the National Guard throughout New Orleans - all the while living off of bottled water, protein shakes and preconstituted meals - Dr. Lizana offers a few words of advice and encouragement for his fellow DCs along the Gulf Coast, and a way for chiropractors throughout the country to help those doctors whose lives have been upended by Hurricane Katrina.

*Dynamic Chiropractic (DC)*: Let's begin with some background information - for instance, where you graduated from and how long you've been practicing.

Robert Lizana (RL): I've been practicing for 22 years. I went to Life Chiropractic College in Marietta, Georgia. I met my wife, Jeri, there; she's also a chiropractor, practicing with me at the office. We opened our office 21 years ago. We have two children, Katie and David.

*DC*: When did you first get involved with the New Orleans Saints?

RL: About 10 years ago, I started treating one of the players. He had a disc problem and felt that his career was in jeopardy. We treated him, and he responded well enough to play the entire season and make the All-Pro team. Since then, it's evolved to where now, I treat 44 of the players as well as most of the coaching staff, executives and administrators in the organization.

*DC*: Do you travel with the team, or do you just treat them at home games?

RL: I travel with the team; however, I will usually work on players the night before a game, and on

Sunday mornings, I start treating them around 7:00 in the morning. I'm very much involved with treating the players from the start of training camp until the last game of the season.

*DC:* With regard to Hurricane Katrina, where were you when it hit?

*RL:* I was a few miles from my house in Metairie, a suburb of New Orleans, at a private hospital with five other doctors and their families, and a handful of police officers.

*DC:* Were you seeing patients at the time, or preparing for the hurricane?

*RL:* We were preparing for the hurricane. I was going to be at the hospital to care for the doctors and policemen. We knew it was going to be rough, and a lot of help would be needed. Hospitals are generally a safe place. It has backup generators and three tiers of protection - an outer wall, an inner wall and a concrete stairwell. So, it's usually a safe place to be during a hurricane, and one of the only places that's able to provide services to the community during and after a hurricane.

*DC:* What was the experience like when the hurricane hit? Were you still able to get out and treat people?

*RL:* It was horrendous. The hospital received some damage. Our electricity was out, the plumbing was out, and there was 4 1/2 feet of water in the streets. We were staying on the fourth floor, so we were dry. We had some food, but not a whole lot; only enough for three or four days. The conditions deteriorated pretty quickly at the hospital, and I was there taking care of the doctors and policemen. You have to realize that it is very hot, there's no electricity, and the lights are out so it's dark, the toilets are backed up, and there is a lot of confusion. This was compounded because our communication systems were out. That's one of the first things that took place in the hurricane. Cell phones didn't work, land phones didn't work; even the radio stations weren't up and running. Communication was completely out. You really didn't know too much about what was going on, except that you knew it was rough. Our policemen were commandeering large trucks that were making it through the water over to the hospital to transport injured policemen back and forth. The policemen were trying to walk through dirty, contaminated water, and they would get cut on any and everything, which led to some nasty infections. Plus, there was the emotional aspect of the policemen not knowing where their families were or whether they were safe. Not to mention, at the same time, they still had a job to do.

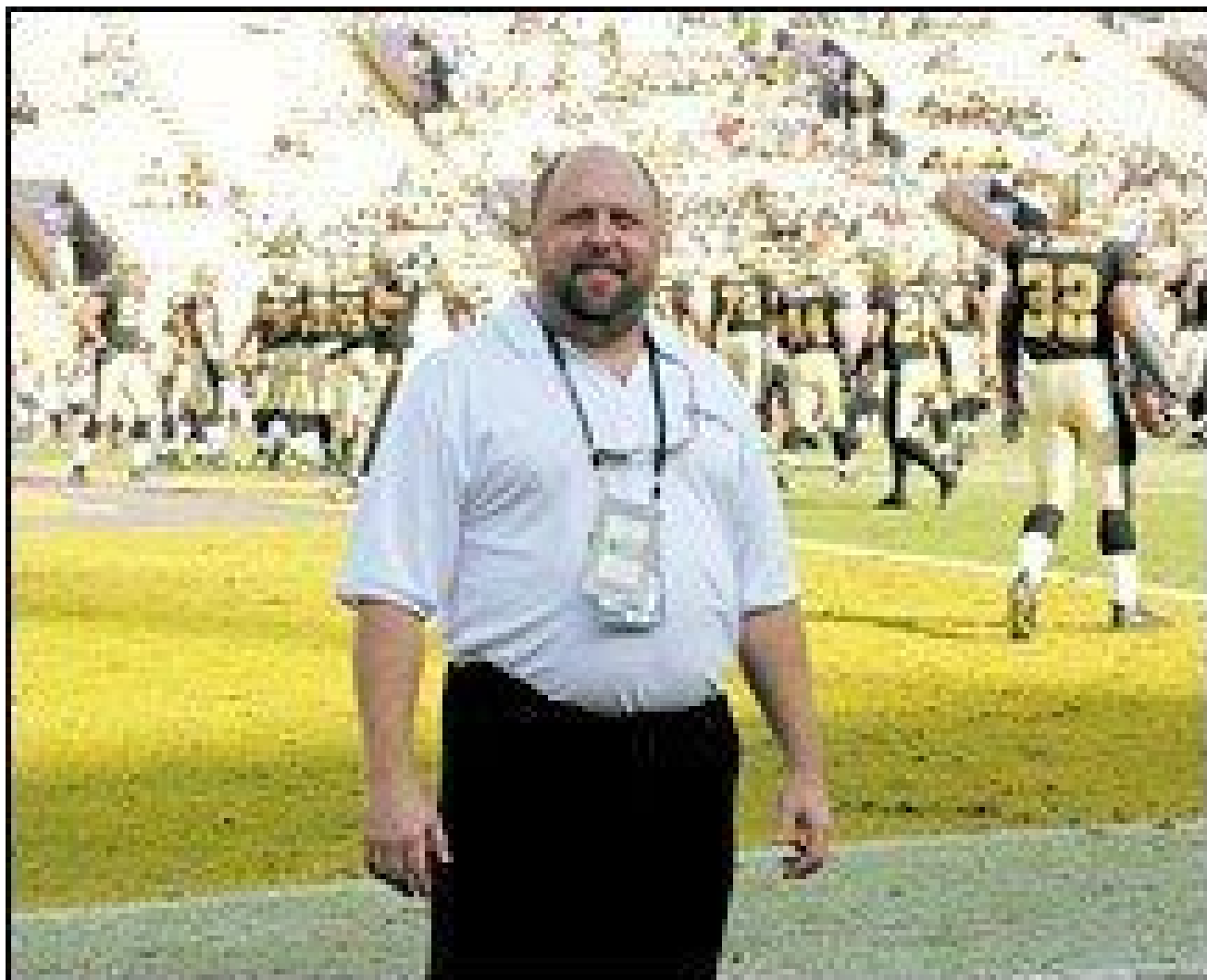
*DC:* How dangerous was it working in those types of conditions?

*RL:* It turned out to be very dangerous. After four days at the hospital and taking care of doctors and policemen, it became dangerous, hot and nasty, plus we were running out of food, medicine and various supplies. There was the threat of looters, and there were people coming off their drugs, panicking and desperately looking for more drugs. The doctors at the hospital started to grab guns and shotguns to arm themselves, to protect their families and the hospital staff. For safety reasons, they basically ordered me and some other doctors to take our families and leave.

At this point in time, I had a thought: One of the doctors is a well-respected neurosurgeon; the other one is a board-certified reproductive endocrinologist. Just a week ago, it could take a patient up to three months to get an appointment with these specialists, and here they are, in their scrubs, armed, wide-eyed and just trying to protect themselves while also trying to help others to survive. For me, that was a real dose of reality about the gravity of the situation we were in.

DC: What was the flow like of people coming back and forth, going in and out?

RL: It was a constant flow; it was so strange. Helicopters were continuously flying overhead 24 hours a day, dropping people off on the interstate just a block from the hospital. These were the people who were plucked from their rooftops by the military. Normally, a hurricane comes and the water rises and then goes down, but this time it didn't go down. When the radios did come on, we heard people screaming: "What's going on? I went from having no water in my house yesterday during the storm, to having 6 feet of water now!" And they were forced into their attics with the water rising. When the levees broke, that's what basically fooled everyone. That was the start of the catastrophe. The hurricane came through and many people rode it out, thinking they were fine. Then all of sudden, the levees broke. That's the thing that wiped everybody out. No one knew the levees had broken and that the city was filling with rising water.



**With the Superdome damaged by Katrina, the Saints were forced to play their 2005 "home" games at various locations, including Louisiana State University.**

We were devastated because the levees that were built to Army Corps of Engineers specifications had failed us. The city survived the hurricane, but when the levees disintegrated, it was apocalyptic. This went on for days with people having to retreat into their attics with no way out - entombed as the water rose higher. Thankfully, once the radio station's tower was up and running, it seemed that somehow people were actually able to get their phone calls through to the radio station. Most of the calls were distress calls from people who needed help, whether they were stranded in their attics or on top of their roofs. They would give their names and addresses, and were begging and pleading for someone to come rescue them, but the radio person had no one to send for their rescue. Once the caller would realize that help might not be coming, they would realize that they might not live through this. They would then send a message of love to their families. The sense of doom in the callers' voices and the helplessness that I felt as a listener, hearing someone lose their grip on life, can still bring me to tears today.

It was a life-changing experience. They were reaching out for help, but there was no help coming except for a radio voice encouraging them to hang in there and not give up. The official death toll stands at about 1,300, and upwards of 6,600 are still reported missing. Some bodies may still be hidden among the rubble; others may have been washed out to sea.

*DC:* How far away were your office and home from the hospital?

*RL:* My office is three miles from the hospital, but about six blocks from where the levee was breached. I'm on the dry side, to be accurate, but my office also got destroyed. When the insurance adjuster walked through only half of my office, she said that it basically was destroyed and not repairable, and that I was grossly underinsured. That's the story with everyone here. Most people within the levee system thought they were protected and had never been flooded before, therefore making flood insurance unnecessary.

For the few who did have flood insurance, it covers a maximum \$250,000 worth of damage. Everyone has comprehensive hurricane wind damage coverage, but that insurance does not cover flooding. So, for most chiropractors affected in this area, there was no insurance reimbursement to cover their losses because it was the breached levees that flooded everyone. It is just a devastating complete loss for these people - their homes and their clinics.

*DC:* Where are you practicing now? Did you relocate to another office?

*RL:* This is what I've done. I have a great working relationship with the Saints' players, coaches, executives and administrators. When they learned of my situation, they asked if I would come to San Antonio to work on them. I spend five days a week in San Antonio and continue traveling with them on the weekends to away games. And because of our relocation situation, sometimes I had to take as many as three plane trips to get to a home game. Compare that to my usual 10-minute drive from my office to the Superdome.

The players have been great and have taken good care of me. In San Antonio, I lived with one of the star players who is single. I don't know if you've ever seen the MTV show, "Cribs," but I'm living in a place like that with one of the players. What's humorous is that I'm married, I have two kids, and I'm old enough to be his father, but it's like I'm back in college and we just get along great. Like the time I walked into the house, arriving from New Orleans, tired and exhausted, and he said, "Hey, welcome

home, Doc! I've got a bunch of food in the fridge for you and this great movie to watch." It definitely was a sense of stability and family. You have to realize that at this point in time, I'm living in three cities - San Antonio, New Orleans, and whichever city we play in that weekend. There were no days off.

*DC:* So, where is your family now? Are they traveling with you?

*RL:* When we finally evacuated New Orleans, we wanted to fly our children to Florida to stay with relatives and friends, but the airport in New Orleans was completely down and the Baton Rouge airport was on a three- to four-week backlog. We decided to drive, but we couldn't go east because the roads going east were destroyed and there was no way to get gas, so we headed west to Baton Rouge - which had its own problems. A city of 250,000 doubled in size in three days. There were long lines for food, no gas, and mass confusion because communications were still out. I told my wife that we could go to Houston because they have their own refineries, so gas would no longer be a problem. Cars were traveling with multiple gasoline cans strapped to their roofs. It was really wild. It was like a "Mad Max" movie, trying to get gas and get to other cities.

Once we arrived in Houston, we were able to fly the children to Florida. It was heartbreaking for my wife and me to separate the family and not know when we would see the kids again, but we knew it would be the best and safest situation for them.

With the kids safely in Florida being cared for by family and friends, my wife and I went back to New Orleans to help. Our house was wind-damaged and had no electricity or water, but we were able to stay there. It was creepy; we were living very primitively, with the smell of dead animals and flies everywhere, and no people around. New Orleans and the surrounding areas went from a 1.2 million population to estimates that 1 million people had evacuated or were displaced. The New Orleans population before the hurricane was 485,000; today, it stands at about 70,000. A loss of 415,000 people is quite dramatic for a city within a few days.



**Hurricane Katrina exacted a steep price on Dr. Lizana's clinic. DC: Were they drawing their weapons when they stopped you?**

My wife and I volunteered at the police command center. We were taking care of police and National Guardsmen who were just completely overwhelmed. The conditions in the city were horrible. Some of these policemen had lost everything; some had not been able to visit their homes and check on their families for as long as a week or two after the storm. There were stories of policemen finally returning to their homes, only to discover their wives and children had died while they were on duty, which sent some of them over the edge to suicide. This is really gut-wrenching stuff! And we just wanted to help and care for these heroic policemen in any way we could. Then, martial law was ordered. Now, I am not sure what that means, and neither did some of the policemen I was working on, because it had never been ordered before, but I can tell you what the experience is like. If you drive somewhere, military police will stop you; if you just stay in your home, they will knock on your door. They figure no

one is supposed to be there, but we were. Therefore, in a sense we were suspects and they would give us a hard time until we explained ourselves.

RL: Oh yes, they have their weapons drawn. They pull up and jump out of trucks or whatever military vehicles they are in, and eight to 16 of them will run with their guns and rifles drawn and just canvass the neighborhood. To be stopped by them was a regular occurrence, happening at least two or three times a day to me and to other people. One of the times it happened to me, I just sat there, stunned, with my hands up. They asked to see my ID and began asking a lot of questions. Once they found out that I was OK - a doctor trying to help out - there were a few moments of relief, until they scared the hell out of me by telling me that I shouldn't open my door for anyone, and I shouldn't stop for anyone when driving, either. It also was suggested that I have a weapon for protection.

We would stay at the house and volunteer our services at the police headquarters. After every three or four days, we would drive to a different city an hour away to shower and get some real food. We were living off of bottled water and MREs, meals ready-to-eat, which were handed out by the military. We mainly lived off of protein drinks - "Total Shake." It's amazing how this can sustain you for days at a time, week after week during a crisis like this.

*Editor's note:* In part 2 of this exclusive interview, Dr. Lizana discusses the plight of the chiropractic profession in Louisiana and Mississippi in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Look for part 2 in the Feb. 27 issue.

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Interview by Michael Devitt

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