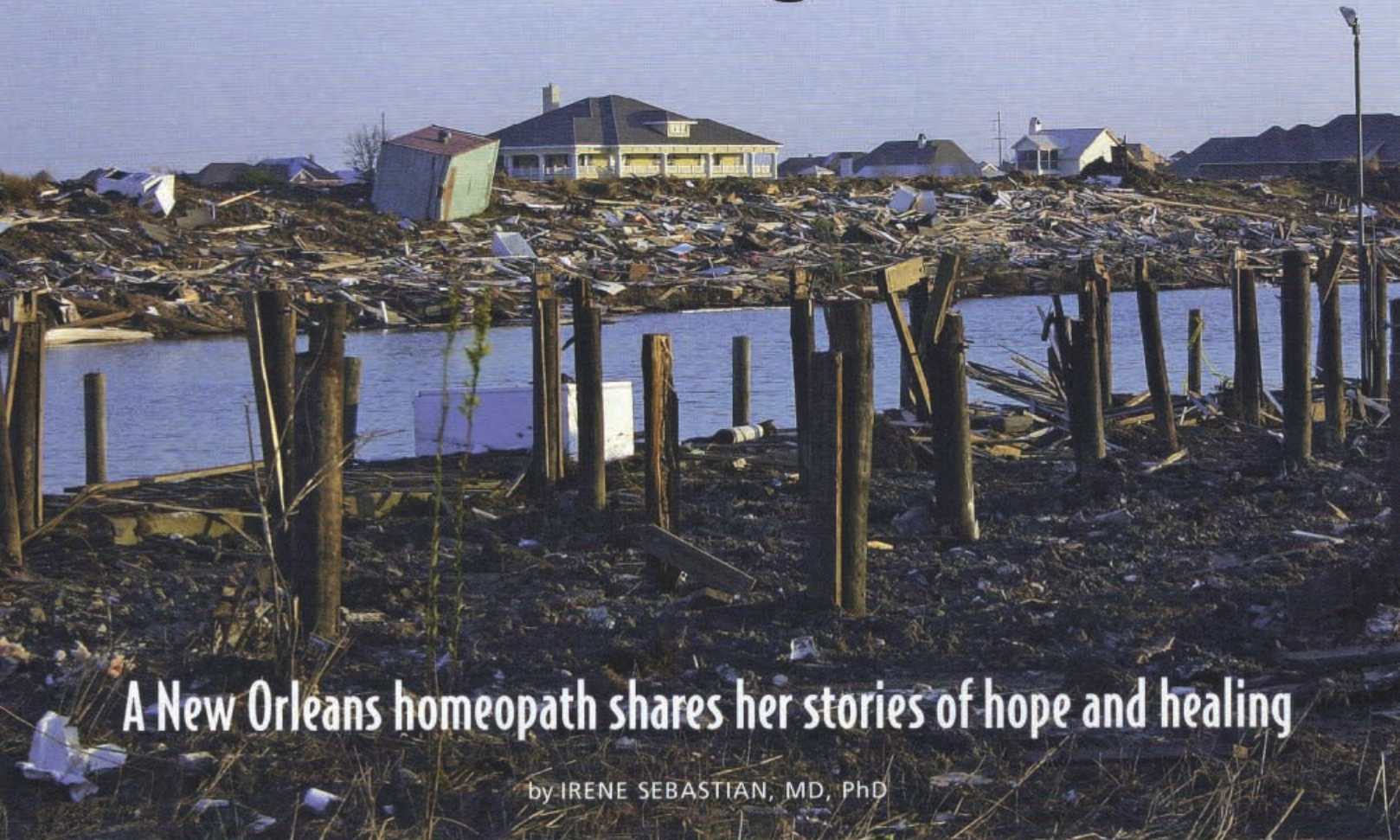


# Hurricane Katrina

and the many  
Faces of *Ignatia*

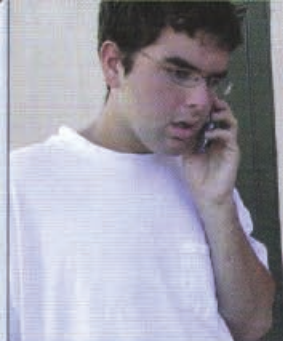


A New Orleans homeopath shares her stories of hope and healing

by IRENE SEBASTIAN, MD, PhD

ARMED WITH HURRICANE LAMPS, MASKS, GLOVES, AND BOOTS, I first returned to New Orleans in late September, about one week after the floodwaters had been pumped out of the city. Most striking to me was simply the sense of death all around. I was used to a New Orleans filled with people and lush tropical gardens—now most of the people were gone and most of the vegetation was dead. The stench was overwhelming.





Near Lake Pontchartrain  
in Slidell, Louisiana;  
by Doug Webb.

From seeing Internet aerial views and reading Internet blogs while staying at my sister's home in Birmingham, Alabama, I knew that my house had flooded. But nothing could have prepared me for the initial entry into my flooded home. The furniture and walls were covered with mold; chairs were overturned and broken; large objects such as my refrigerator and mattress were not in their usual places and had obviously floated. Perhaps most difficult was seeing my homeopathic books strewn all over the floor, still sopping wet and stinking from the flood waters.

Despite all this, I wanted to return to

New Orleans and stay—at least for a while. Just a few months before the storm, I had moved my medical practice to an office building about 400 feet on “the other side” of the infamous 17th Street Canal whose levee breach had flooded my house. Thus my office was OK, and I reopened my practice in October.

### Suffering everywhere

The first thing I noticed upon reopening was the tremendous amount of suffering in the general population. Between August 29 and December 31, 2005, the suicide rate in New Orleans was 9 times the national average. One of my patients, a

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police officer, told me that 90% of police officers have physical ailments that were not present before Katrina, and 20% have been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Many senior citizens who had been living independently prior to Katrina are now in nursing homes. Family members are living apart so that children can go to school and parents can work. Divorces and broken relationships are commonplace.

The second thing I noticed was how easy it was to help many of these suffering people with homeopathic remedies. As homeopaths in a typical, day-to-day practice, we often see patients who come to us after a lifetime of difficulties, on many medications, with many different medical conditions. We struggle to find where the path away from health occurred in the patient's life in order to choose a remedy that will help them. But with post-Katrina patients, the precipitating factor that affected their health was known; I only needed to understand how Katrina affected each person. A few simple questions (How were you affected by Katrina?

What was most difficult for you? What physical and emotional changes have occurred since Katrina?) were generally all that I needed to ask in order to find the remedy. Because most patients were still in an acute state, symptoms were clear and intense, and the response to the indicated remedy was quick.

### Many faces, one remedy

By far, the most commonly needed remedy has been *Ignatia amara*. As many of you know, *Ignatia* is a remedy commonly indicated for people in an acute grief state or for those whose ailments are triggered by an acute grief. The grief could be due to

the death of a loved one or the loss of a relationship, but it may also be caused by the loss of a house, possessions, money, a job, or a life's work. Here are some expressions of the *Ignatia* state as seen in my post-Katrina patients.

### Uncontrollable crying

Twenty-eight-year-old Rachel was referred to me by her therapist, who suggested that Rachel be considered for antidepressant therapy. Three months post-Katrina, Rachel continued to feel depressed after losing her house. She was living in Baton Rouge with her husband and 15 others. (Multiple households sharing one house are commonplace post-Katrina.) She complained of difficulty sleeping, loss of appetite, lack of motivation, difficulty concentrating, indecisiveness, impatience, and frequent feelings of frustration. She said that she cried frequently, and, in fact, she was crying uncontrollably during the interview. She was also sighing frequently. Perhaps most importantly, she was on the verge of getting a divorce—she feared she had made the wrong decision in getting





PHOTO BY BILL LAVENDER

The flooded "mid-city" neighborhood of New Orleans. Dr. Irene Sebastian's home is the blue one on the right.

married two years earlier. I specifically asked whether, prior to Katrina, she had thought the marriage was a mistake. She answered, "No." From this, I surmised that her post-Katrina marital discontent might have been an expression of her grief state and an example of an *Ignatia* patient's indecision—expressed as a rethinking of past decisions. She also liked being in control, but she felt she might have no control in deciding where she and her husband would eventually live.

Based on her symptoms of depression

dramatic." A month after our second visit, she had taken two additional doses of *Ignatia*, but she had needed no more after that—and no antidepressant. Her marriage was intact and harmonious. Rachel's case illustrates that the reaction to *Ignatia* can be rapid, dramatic, and lasting.

#### Living in a FEMA trailer

I first saw 11-year-old Joey four months after Hurricane Katrina. He had become more short-tempered and sarcastic than before; the smallest things bothered him,

## After the death of a loved one, the funeral provides some closure for the grieving family; in New Orleans, however, the devastation of the city remains in plain sight.

after a grief, involuntary weeping and sighing, sleeplessness, impatience, and indecision, I gave her a dose of *Ignatia* 200c, talked to her another ten minutes or so, and asked her to return in one week. I presumed that if the *Ignatia* was going to work, it would act quickly, and I wanted to see her reaction before she left the office. In fact, she stopped crying and appeared calmer, so I knew that the remedy had acted. I gave her a few additional doses of *Ignatia* 200c to take later if needed. When she returned to see me in a week, she reported that she had taken two more doses of *Ignatia*. The uncontrollable crying had resolved and she appeared quite contented. She said, "I feel like I got myself back."

When I spoke to Rachel last week (about six months after our initial visit), she sounded great and said that she continues to feel well. She remarked that the effect of the *Ignatia* had been "extremely

and he would lose his temper and slam things. Joey sobbed sometimes, though he tried not to cry. When his mother attempted to console him, he snapped back saying, "you wouldn't get it" (i.e., wouldn't understand). Many of his friends had moved away. He and his parents were living in a FEMA trailer in their front yard—no other families were living on their street. He was being home-schooled.

As if these emotional changes were not enough, Joey also had been having foot pain. He said that it felt as if his foot was "out-of-socket." This pain would come and go with no apparent trigger. Another physician had taken x-rays, which were normal, and had assured Joey that "everything is fine."

The indications for *Ignatia* were again easy to see. Some of Joey's *Ignatia* symptoms included: easy irritability, rudeness, a tendency to get angry at trifles, a tendency

to sob and weep involuntarily, a feeling of being misunderstood, and feeling worse from consolation. I had one main question: was Joey's foot pain also part of the *Ignatia* state? In other words, was this a case of two dissimilar diseases requiring two different remedies, or were the emotional changes and foot pain part of the same disease state? I searched the materia medica for the term "as if dislocated" using *ReferenceWorks* software and was surprised to learn that, of 128 remedies listed, *Ignatia* was the remedy most often mentioned. While I could have prescribed *Ignatia* without knowing whether the dislocated sensation is typical of *Ignatia*, I research these kinds of questions to learn more about the remedies. It also increased my confidence that the foot pain would resolve with *Ignatia*.

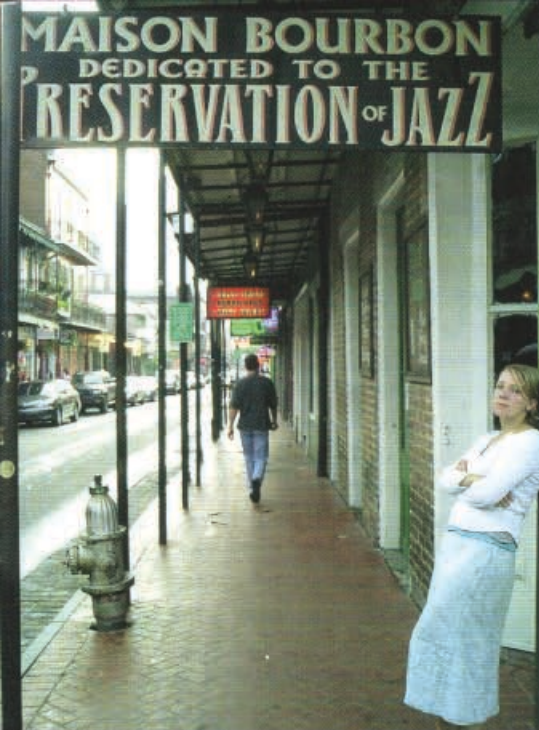
I gave Joey one dose of *Ignatia* 30c. His mother later told me that his mood improved "immediately" after the first dose. He required two more doses of *Ignatia* during the next week when he relapsed a bit into moodiness—and that was all. Joey's emotional state steadily improved after that, and he never mentioned the foot

pain again. The fact that his foot x-ray and physical examination were normal is not surprising for a patient requiring *Ignatia*. People in an *Ignatia* state typically have only functional symptoms—that is, they may experience a disturbance of function, but the disturbance has not led to destructive changes, and thus, nothing will be found on exam or with diagnostic tests.

#### Not just a customer problem

Jessica, 38, came to see me 3 months post-Katrina. She told me that since Katrina, she cried daily, felt hopeless, became angry more quickly than usual over little things, and lost her patience easily. She worked in customer relations and was unable to control her moodiness and irritability. Although she felt terrible about her behavior and apologized to customers and colleagues frequently, she said she was unable to change. Jessica's symptoms—





BODIN BUCHTHUIS (ROYALTY-FREE WITH ATTRIBUTION)



DAVID TANNEY



despair, irritability, changeable mood, remorse, reproaching herself, ailments from grief—seemed to indicate *Ignatia*, once again. One might have considered giving Jessica *Nux vomica* because it matched her symptoms of quick irritability and impatience, but people needing *Nux vomica* are less likely to feel remorse.

Jessica also complained of crampy diarrhea in the middle of the night. *Ignatia* has “diarrhea after grief” as part of its symptom picture (although *Ignatia* diarrhea is often painless). I gave Jessica a dose of *Ignatia* 30c and told her to take another dose after each loose bowel movement. When I saw her one week later, Jessica said that she had taken four doses of *Ignatia* before her moodiness and diarrhea resolved. Over the next few months, she took two more doses of *Ignatia* when she had a relapse of diarrhea, but she needed no more doses after that. I concluded that Jessica’s diarrhea was functional (i.e., “irritable bowel syndrome”) and that it was part of the *Ignatia* symptom picture; if it had not resolved quickly, I would have done a diagnostic evaluation.

#### Sore throat and sadness

Janice, a 62-year-old-woman, came to me complaining of a sore throat. The most striking feature was that the pain was

worse when she wasn’t swallowing—a classic *Ignatia* symptom. When I asked how she had been affected by the hurricane, she mentioned that her house had flooded and she had just returned to New Orleans for the first time. Janice was sad, but she did not have the uncontrollable crying seen in many other patients who had been helped by *Ignatia*. I gave her *Ignatia* 30c—Janice’s sore throat resolved quickly, and she felt better emotionally.

#### Separated from her children

Twenty-five-year-old Keisha returned to New Orleans in order to keep her job, but her two young children remained in Houston because she did not have a suitable place to live. Although she was able to work each day, she cried each night because she missed her children. Again, a few doses of *Ignatia* 30c helped her through this difficult situation.

#### Longing for home

As the above cases illustrate, the need for *Ignatia* manifests in many different ways. Most commonly, patients have simply talked about feeling very sad; they often seek help because of uncontrollable crying. But if I had to choose one symptom that best describes the *Ignatia* state as seen in my patients (and in the New Orleans com-

### Emotional First-Aid: Think *Ignatia*

*Ignatia amara* is a homeopathic remedy prepared from St. Ignatius’ beans—the seeds of a shrub that grows in the Philippines and China. The Spanish Jesuits who introduced them into Europe in the 17th century named the beans.

*Ignatia* can help people who are experiencing bad effects from an acute grief, loss, or emotional shock. Those who need this remedy may:

- cry uncontrollably
- sigh frequently, experience changeable moods, be indecisive, get angry at trifles
- have “functional” symptoms (i.e., physical problems that cannot be diagnosed via medical testing)
- have symptoms that come on suddenly (and that will resolve quickly if *Ignatia* is given)
- exhibit contradictory symptoms (e.g., a sore throat that is worse when not swallowing; an empty feeling in the stomach not relieved by eating).

*Ignatia* may be used by anyone, but it seems to be more frequently indicated for females than males.

Keep this remedy in your first-aid kit!





"Perhaps most difficult was seeing my homeopathic books strewn all over the floor, still sopping wet and stinking from the flood waters," said Dr. Irene Sebastian, upon returning to her New Orleans home after the waters receded.

edy. I've asked myself, "Why has this untreated *Ignatia* state of mind persisted for so long?"

I think the persistence is due to the multiple losses people have experienced—but there are additional factors in New Orleans

intensifying the *Ignatia* state. *Ignatia* appears in the homeopathic repertory in bold-type for the symptom, "Mind, irresolution, indecision." So while it is typically difficult for someone in an *Ignatia* state to make decisions (e.g., Do I stay or leave? Do I rebuild or buy? If I rebuild, do I elevate my house?), it's even more difficult in New Orleans because much of the information needed to make such decisions has been unavailable (e.g., revised FEMA flood maps, whether levees will be repaired, etc.). Furthermore, the disintegration of support systems for individuals has made the healing for New Orleanians all the more difficult. For example, if someone had had a personal loss prior to Katrina (e.g., a fire destroyed their house),

the rest of the community would still have been intact to offer support. Post-Katrina, however, friends have left town or are unable to help because of their own problems; churches and schools are not functioning; and the previous support systems are gone. Another reason for the persistent *Ignatia* state may be a lack of closure. After the death of a loved one, the funeral provides some closure for the grieving family; in New Orleans, however, the devastation of the city remains in plain sight.

Two final, very apparent *Ignatia* symptoms in the community are listed in the homeopathic repertory as, "Mind, indignation," and "Mind, cannot support injustice." Senator Mary Landrieu asked why a small country such as The Netherlands can protect itself from the North Sea but the greatest country on earth cannot protect New Orleans from a lake. Many New Orleanians are confused as to why the U.S. seems so hesitant to rebuild New Orleans, yet is spending billions to rebuild Iraq. One patient told me, "I used to be very patriotic, but now I am not. I no longer trust the government ... I don't know what

munity), it is *homesickness*. The sense of homesickness is profound in New Orleans. I often hear people say, "I want things to be the way they were," or "Things will never be the same." What has been lost goes far deeper than losing one's house—a house can be replaced. What has been lost is a sense of neighborhood and community, as well as perhaps family, friends, and pets. *Ignatia* appears in the homeopathic repertory in bold type for the rubric "Mind, homesickness, nostalgia."

Every day, I see patients who are acutely in need of *Ignatia*—a full nine months after Katrina. One would think that *Ignatia* is primarily a remedy to use after an acute crisis, and that by now, people might need a different, more chronic rem-

**I have seen how desperately people need help in a disaster situation and how extremely effective homeopathy can be.**



HOUSTON ASTRODOME BY ZACH CASPER (ROYALTY-FREE WITH ATTRIBUTION)





to tell my children now." These *Ignatia* symptoms appear in the repertory as, "Mind, idealistic" and "Mind, ailments from disappointment, deception."

### A genus epidemicus?

Because of the frequency with which I have prescribed *Ignatia* for post-Katrina ailments, I began to think of it in terms of a *genus epidemicus* for the Katrina disaster. Previously, I had only thought of that concept in terms of infectious/epidemic diseases—never in terms of the emotional response to a disaster. Understanding *Ignatia* as a possible *genus epidemicus* (i.e., a remedy that fits the symptoms of a large number of people during an "epidemic") has been helpful to me in treating some patients who have had vague, less intense symptoms, which, on their own, would not have led me to a remedy. In such cases, I have often given *Ignatia* 30c with excellent results.

### *Ignatia* not the only remedy

This is not to imply that no other remedies than *Ignatia* have been needed in the aftermath of Katrina. Some of my patients with an intense sense of indignation have benefited from the homeopathic remedy *Staphysagria*. Many others have benefited from taking another dose of their chronic remedy—the remedy that had been helping them for chronic conditions prior to the disaster. Nancy, 32, called from another state to tell me that her migraine headaches and severe eye pain had returned. When I asked her how the hurricane had affected her, she said "grief... it's like Pompeii... just witnessing the death of a city." Although her relapse was an "ailment from grief," *Ignatia* is not the only remedy that can address ailments from grief. Her symptoms were essentially the same as they had been in the past when I treated her with *Natrum muriaticum*, so I recommended a dose of *Natrum muriaticum* IM (which happens to be another homeopathic remedy indicated for "ailments from grief"). Her headaches and eye

pain resolved quickly after one dose. I often found that patients who had responded well to *Natrum muriaticum* in the past went directly into a *Natrum muriaticum* state after Katrina rather than an *Ignatia* state. I sometimes prescribed *Ignatia* for them first, but it did not work, while a later dose of *Natrum muriaticum* cured.

### Terror in the Superdome

I have seen only one patient who experienced the horror of nearly drowning in the floodwaters, eventually making her way to the Superdome where she feared being killed by roaming gangs; she was later evacuated by helicopter. This patient, in a severe state of post-traumatic stress disorder when I first saw her, has benefited from *Stramonium*, a remedy often helpful for someone who has experienced a terror and then relives it over and over in their mind. Many people who had similar terrifying experiences were evacuated and are not currently in New Orleans; thus, I have had no opportunity to hear their stories and am unable to comment on the most commonly needed remedies for this group.

### Homeopathy, easy & effective

So, nine months post-Katrina, what can I say about my experiences as a homeopath? I have seen how desperately people need help in a disaster situation and how extremely effective homeopathy can be. Treating patients with emotional stress in an acute setting seems particularly easy. Many people who have seemed "stuck" in an *Ignatia* state have been able to heal quickly when given *Ignatia*. One can only wonder about the development of chronic disease if people are not treated in a timely manner.

### Come visit!

As for New Orleans, there are areas, most notably the French Quarter and historic uptown neighborhoods, which appear as they did prior to Katrina; thus, from the perspective of the typical tourist, New Orleans may seem unchanged. Because of the national perception that "New Orleans is closed," however, most small businesses in the French Quarter are struggling to survive. I encourage you to come for a visit! (And if you like New Orleans music, visit my sister's shop, Good Rockin' New Orleans, specializing in New Orleans' CDs, DVDs, books, posters, and memorabilia.)

There are other devastated areas of the city that have not changed much since Katrina struck. It is impossible not to feel a profound sadness as you look at one abandoned house after another for many miles and wonder what happened to the people who once lived here. One positive effect of this tragedy, however, is an incredible community spirit in New Orleans, unlike anything I have ever experienced.

### Rebuilding & replanting

As for me, I live in the "mid-city" neighborhood of New Orleans—we flooded though not as badly as many other neighborhoods. But even here, progress is slow. I have learned to rejoice for the little things—a neighborhood gasoline station, a grocery store, a restaurant. We still have no telephone lines—but houses are being rebuilt, many of my neighbors have returned, and beautiful gardens are being replanted. The rebuilding of my own house is nearly finished, and I hope to return "home" soon.



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Irene Sebastian, MD, PhD, earned her doctorate in Human Development from the University of Chicago and spent many years as a teacher and researcher. After deciding to become a homeopath, she earned her medical degree from Northwestern University and completed a residency in family medicine in Savannah, GA. Since completing her medical training, she has lived in New Orleans. She serves as Vice-President of the American Institute of Homeopathy.

