

Ethics After Hours

Playing God Podcast by Radiolab

Summary¹

How do you make decisions about medical resource allocation when people are dying and there are not enough resources to save everyone? How do you choose who to save? In this episode of Radiolab reporter Sheri Fink searches for an answer. The episode is inspired by her book about the events at Memorial Hospital in the days after Hurricane Katrina.² The podcast discusses the difficult choices that health care providers and first responders are faced with when having to decide how to triage patients and allocate scarce medical resources in crisis situations such as warzones or emergencies such as hurricanes or earthquakes.

Duration: 1:01:37 hrs

Produced by Simon Adler and Annie McEwen.

Reported by Sheri Fink. Radiolab

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Available on WNYC studios: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/articles/playing-god>

Questions for discussion:

- What stood out the most to you in this podcast episode and why?
- What, if anything, do these stories tell us about ethics around resource allocation in non-crisis situations?
- At Memorial Hospital, doctors decided that the critical care patients who had a DNR in place would be evacuated last. Do you agree with this decision? Why or why not?
- The following are examples of different allocation/triage criteria that are mentioned in the podcast:
 - Save the sickest first
 - First come, first served
 - Random selection/Lottery

¹ This summary is adapted from the Episode description on Radiolab's website: <https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/radiolab/episodes/playing-god-broadcast>

² Sheri Fink (2013) *Five Days in Memorial: Life and Death in a Storm-Ravaged Hospital*; Crown Publishing Group.

- Save the youngest first
- Save the healthiest first (most life-years)
- Save those who are most likely to survive
 - If you were to allocate scarce life-saving resources during a pandemic to save people's lives which criteria would you apply, and why?
 - What are the ethical implications (benefits and burdens) of prioritising use of scarce medical resources based on each of these criteria?
- Do you think an individual person's contribution / instrumental value to society should be part of the considerations in resource allocation?
- In the episode, doctors and nurses at the front line had to decide there and then on a triage system for evacuation of patients, because there was no triage protocol in place. Discuss the benefits of having guidelines and protocols in place for triaging of scarce medical resources in an emergency situation.
- Sheri found herself in a situation where she wanted to break the triage rule to help a woman who needed oxygen. The producers of this episode asks "In these extreme circumstances where life and death are wrestling with each other – can you make rules?" – What do you think?
 - Discuss Sheri's reason for breaking the rule.