

Heat at the Border

Category: Heat

written by Austin Arceneaux | September 19, 2023

The last patient on the last day of my critical care rotation arrived at the ED by airbus. She was 21 years old, barely responsive, and accompanied by border patrol. The ED called us about 30 minutes later, once they'd stabilized her. We arrived in her room, and the ED resident recounted what had occurred. She'd required intubation and several rounds of CPR to achieve resuscitation. The situation had calmed for a moment, but then she started to convulse. They administered medications and her shaking stopped.

All that was known about her was that she was from Latin America and that she'd lost consciousness while with a group of other migrants just blocks away from the border wall. She carried with her a small piece of paper with four numbers written on it, one with a Chicago area code. The numbers either connected to a deactivated phone or were too short to be phone numbers.

Her labs were in disarray—her platelets and clotting factors were malfunctioning; multiple organs showed signs of injury. We suspected she'd suffered heatstroke. She was the second-sickest patient I'd seen all month.

Days earlier, I'd seen the sickest patient of the month. She also was in her early 20's, was a migrant from Latin America, and had suffered heatstroke. She arrived at night and by late the next morning had died.

As of mid-September 2023, El Paso had seen 70 days of 100-degree or greater heat. In the El Paso border sector, the border patrol reported finding the bodies of 140 migrants since October 2022; they attributed 58 of those deaths to the heat. The sector has seen a very steep rise in migrant deaths this year.

After my critical care stint, I began an ambulatory rotation the next week. I had some downtime during lunch on my first day, so I checked the hospital's electronic medical record. I saw that the last patient on the last day of my critical care rotation had died over the weekend.

You wonder what she experienced on her journey to the U.S.-Mexico border and what her hopes were in coming north. You wonder where her family is and how long it will take before they learn what has happened to her. You wonder how we can stop this from happening.

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