

Inside Hawaii's Only Burn Unit, a Crush of Maui Victims

By MITCH SMITH

HONOLULU — When Dr. David C. Cho's phone rang in the middle of the night, it was an emergency room physician calling from Maui, two islands away, seeking help.

"In very plain and simple terms he said, 'Lahaina is destroyed,'" recalled Dr. Cho, a plastic surgeon who works in the burn unit at Straub Medical Center in Honolulu. "And then it just went silent."

Dr. Cho got out of bed, went to the hospital and waited.

"I just knew there was going to be a pipeline of patients," he said. As hurricane-fanned flames overwhelmed Maui last week and rescue crews worked frantically to reach the wounded, some survivors' injuries proved too extensive for that island's hospitals and needed the most intensive burn care available. Nine burn patients were flown nearly 100 miles to Honolulu and then driven by ambulance to Straub, whose burn unit is the only facility of its kind in Hawaii, and the only one in the North Pacific between California and Asia.

At the Honolulu hospital, doctors and nurses went to work trying to stabilize the crush of new arrivals, who ranged in age from young adults to seniors, and whose second- and third-degree burns in some cases covered up to 70 percent of their bodies.

For the doctors, the nine arriving victims represented the largest influx of patients from a single incident in the burn unit's history. As consumed as the medical workers were by the extraordinary needs of these patients, another question lingered: Might more be flown in soon — more people who could be saved?

Back on Maui, what would become the country's deadliest wildfire in more than a century was still not contained, and newly homeless evacuees from Lahaina, an oceanside town that was once the capital of the Hawaiian kingdom, were pouring into shelters. Inside the operating rooms and yellow-walled hallways of the burn unit in downtown Honolulu, there was no time to learn those details.

"As a surgeon, you have to just take one step at a time and take care of the patient in front of you," Dr. Cho said in an interview inside the hospital this week. "In fact, I probably was one of the least-informed persons on the island at that time. In that 36 hours because I didn't have time to know what was on CNN."

Hospital officials declined to provide specifics on the conditions of the Maui wildfire, citing privacy concerns.

But the disaster underscored the reason the unit was created, said Dr. Robert W. Schulz, a plastic surgeon who co-founded the unit with the late Penn State physician. Until the 1980s, there was no burn treatment facility in Hawaii, which meant doctors had to track down airplanes to transport people to the mainland to receive specialized care. Too often, patients died before they got there. And even when they did make it to California, they would sometimes spend long hospital stays away from their families, undergoing painful treatments.

Dr. Schulz, the unit's medical director, was among those treating the Maui patients in recent days. He described working to make sure patients losing significant amounts of blood received enough fluid. He recounted long stretches in the operating room that started in the morning and lasted until 8 at night. And he cautioned that with many burn patients, the worst days of treatment are not the first ones.

"You come in, you're articulate



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for about 12 hours, and then, you know, you're now medicated so much that for the next three to four months you're in continual surgery." Dr. Schulz said, speaking generally about patients with extensive injuries.

Kimberly Webster, a registered nurse who is the manager of the burn unit and a critical care unit at Straub, said she had been following the weather early last week, aware that intense dryness and high winds from a hurricane off Hawaii's coast had increased the fire danger. She said she had tracked those reports in the same way she might monitor the Fourth of July, when the proliferation of fireworks increases the possibility of severe burns. But there was no pre-emptive effort to add staff or clear rooms.

"You're alert and you're aware of that," said Ms. Webster, "but you don't start moving people when you don't need to."

That started to change on the evening of Aug. 8, as the first reports of destruction on Maui began to filter in. Early on, Ms. Webster said, there were indications that around 10 patients might need to be flown in. But much remained unclear.

Given Honolulu's geography, the doctors and nurses at Straub are used to treating patients arriv-

ing by plane. The unit regularly takes in burn victims from other islands in Hawaii, from U.S. territories like Guam, from Pacific nations like Micronesia and from cargo ships at sea.

But those patients usually come one or two at a time. The volume of new arrivals from the wildfire and the speed with which they arrived became a singular event in the careers of the doctors and nurses.

As doctors at Straub spoke with their counterparts on Maui, in some cases reviewing photos or



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videos of wounds, they made decisions on which patients needed to be transferred. In some less severe cases, patients can receive care outside a formal burn unit. In other instances, a person's burns might be so extensive, and their prognosis so poor, that focusing on their comfort is more appropriate than putting them through a fight.

"But it's that big piece in the middle that you can provide a quality of life and a real benefit," Dr. Schulz said. "They're now

frustrated and you can save them and you have this facility that can do it for them that is not 2,000 miles away."

Advances in treatment in recent decades, including the development of skin substitutes, have improved the long-term outlook for people who sustain massive burns. Still, hospital stays regularly last for months and involve painful daily treatments and repeated surgeries.

In many cases, surgeons must remove healthy skin and graft it onto parts of the body that burned. But after one graft, it takes time for skin to grow back to allow for another. And for patients with burns on 70 percent of their body, there is relatively little healthy skin left to graft from in the first place.

In between surgeries, nurses work to keep the wounds clean, properly bandaged and free from infection. In a small room with water-proof flooring and heated ceiling tiles in the corner of the burn unit, nurses in plastic gowns will methodically wash wounds, sometimes spending two hours with a single patient. The room is warmed to about 85 degrees, Ms. Webster said, a temperature that helps stave off hypothermia for patients without skin but that can leave medical providers drenched in sweat.

"It's uncomfortable for the patients," Ms. Webster said of the washing process, and "it can be uncomfortable for the nursing staff."

In interviews, medical providers in the unit, many of whom are longtime Hawaii residents, said they found deep meaning in being able to help their state through the fire. But with the known death toll now at 99 and likely to increase, they lamented that they had not had the chance to save more people.

"It's heartbreaking," Dr. Cho said. "I wish there were more transfers coming in — that's my real reflection."

Dr. David C. Cho, a plastic surgeon who works in the burn unit at Straub Medical Center in Honolulu. The wildfire on Maui, left, brought to its doors the largest influx of patients in the unit's 40-year history.

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In recent days, however, hundreds of FEMA workers have been on the ground in Maui, including Ms. Criswell. The governor has also been in regular contact with the White House.

By Monday afternoon, more than 3,000 people had registered with FEMA for federal assistance, according to Jeremy Greenberg, the director of the agency's operations division.

FEMA is typically the first agency to face intense scrutiny after disasters, but while it plays a critical role in disaster response, its mission is to support states with funding and other resources, not to be the first on the scene.

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Biden Plans Visit 'Soon' To Inspect Disaster Area

By REID J. EPSTEIN and SHAWN HUBLER

MILWAUKEE — President Biden said on Tuesday that he would travel to Hawaii to inspect damage on Maui after deadly wildfires ripped through the island, killing at least 98 people and devastating an entire coastal town.

"My wife, Jill, and I are going to travel to Hawaii as soon as we can," Mr. Biden said in a speech focused on the economy at a manufacturing plant in Milwaukee. "That's what I've been talking to the governor about but I don't want to get in the way."

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Recovery teams with cadaver dogs are searching for bodies in the ruins of incinerated cars, homes, businesses and landmarks, and painstakingly working to identify the dead and notify their families. Only about a quarter of the burn area has been searched, and the toll is expected to rise substantially.

The fire devastated much of the west side of Maui, including Lahaina, a coastal community of 13,000 that was once the capital of the Hawaiian kingdom, and wiped out more than 2,000 structures, the vast majority of them residential.

Mr. Biden said in his remarks on Tuesday that he wanted to ensure that his visit didn't disrupt recovery efforts, before ticking through the assistance the federal government has begun to provide, including supplies, one-time cash payments and additional personnel to aid firefighters and relieve emergency workers.

Reid J. Epstein reported from Milwaukee, and Shawn Hubler from Sacramento.

In Wisconsin, Biden Attacks a Far-Right Senator but Avoids Talking About Trump

By REID J. EPSTEIN

MILWAUKEE — A week before Republicans visit Milwaukee for their first debate of the 2024 campaign, President Biden traveled to the city on Tuesday and attacked not former Republican Sen. Ronald J. Trump or his Republican primary rivals, but Senator Ron Johnson of Wisconsin.

Mr. Biden spent several minutes contrasting his political record with that of Mr. Johnson, a Republican who has long expressed skepticism about government investment in local manufacturing jobs.

"Ron Johnson, he believes outsourcing jobs is a great thing," Mr. Biden said. "He doesn't think American workers should manufacture products that require a lot of jobs."

Mr. Biden's sustained attack on Mr. Johnson, who won re-election last year to a third term that won't end until 2023, served as a stand-in for an attack on Mr. Trump. The incident on Mr. Johnson's trip to Trump in Georgia, the fourth brought against the former president, loomed heavy over the effort by the White House and the Biden campaign to promote his economic agenda, which they have

taken to calling "Bidenomics."

The president has not addressed his predecessor's legal travails, and he continued to avoid them on Tuesday. The White House, Mr. Biden's campaign and the Democratic National Committee each declined to comment about the charges against Mr. Trump in Georgia.

"I think we've seen this movie before," Olivia Dalton, a White House spokeswoman, told reporters en route to Milwaukee. "We certainly can't speak to what others are spending their time on."

Indeed, Mr. Biden's tour and speech at a factory that produces wind turbine generators and electric vehicle charging stations were aimed at highlighting legislation he signed last year investing in renewable energy manufacturing. He reminded the audience several times that Mr. Johnson voted against the bill, as he sought to elevate the senator as an avatar of far-right "MAGA" elements of the Republican Party.

"We have the best workers in the world," Mr. Biden said. "It's about time Ron Johnson's friends understood that."

remarks, Mr. Johnson replied in a text message, "He is lying."

In Wisconsin, where the parochial nature of the state's politics has often insulated it from national happenings, Mr. Biden's trip served as a kickoff to a campaign for what officials in both parties expect to be again among the most competitive battleground states in the country. Vice President Kamala Harris visited the state last week to promote broadband access at a factory in Kenosha County and attend a fundraiser in Milwaukee.

Four of the last six presidential elections in Wisconsin have been decided by less than 23,000 votes. Since 2000, only Barack Obama has won the state by more. The state is in perpetual campaign mode. Four months after a State Supreme Court race that became the most expensive judicial election in American history, the Democratic Party of Wisconsin has retained nearly all of its organizing staff in preparation for bruising campaigns for president and the Senate. Senator Tammy Baldwin, a Democrat who helped introduce Mr. Biden at his event on Tuesday, is seeking a third term.

Even the most liberal Democrats in the state have rallied behind Mr. Biden, just as they did last year for Gov. Tony Evers, a white-haired picketball enthusiast whose big applause line during his re-election victory speech last fall was "boring wins."

"Folks are used to having to support older white men in this state," said Francesca Hong, a

A trip to kick off a campaign that is expected to be close.

Democratic state representative from Madison. "I'm going to keep saying Bidenomics as often as I can."

Meanwhile, Wisconsin Republicans remain at odds about whether to keep fighting about the 2020 election.

A Trump-endorsed candidate for governor who questioned the legitimacy of the 2020 contest won last year's primary but lost the general election to Mr. Evers. The

Wisconsin Assembly's Republican speaker spent 14 months on an investigation into the 2020 election — an endeavor that ended only after the former State Supreme Court justice resigned for leading it, endorsing the primary opponent of the man who appointed him.

And now one of the leading Republican prospects to take on Sen. Johnson in next year's election is Clark J. Clark Jr., a former Milwaukee County sheriff who has become a regular figure on the far-right, pro-Trump speaking circuit.

Mr. Clark on Tuesday said the Republican leadership in the State Legislature had become "disconnected" from the party's base because it had failed to change voting laws in response to Mr. Biden's 2020 victory in the state.

"I am connected to and keep my finger on the pulse of the base voter," Mr. Clark said. "The concern is that voting integrity issues have not been resolved by the G.O.P. Legislature since the 2020 election. In a clean, fair and honest election, they feel we can win."

Mr. Clark said he did not have a timeline to enter the race. "My name recognition and approval rating with G.O.P. voters in the

state put me on my side," he said.

Wisconsin's politics are on the verge of a major shift, with the State Supreme Court gaining a liberal majority for the first time in 15 years. The court is poised this week to decide on a pending ban on abortion as well as Republican-drawn maps that have given the G.O.P. near-supremacy control of the State Legislature.

Options in both parties say the looming court decisions could juice turnout for their bases. Republicans are already outraged at the prospect of having the court overturn the abortion law and redraw the maps. The State Assembly speaker suggested last week that he might consider impeachment hearings for the newly elected justice if she does not recuse herself from calling the maps "rigged" during her campaign.

Democrats, on the other hand, see the possibility of having competitive pro-ballot races for the first time since 2010 as a way to energize liberal voters who may not otherwise be enthused about voting for Mr. Biden, whose approval ratings in Wisconsin have sagged as they have elsewhere in the country.