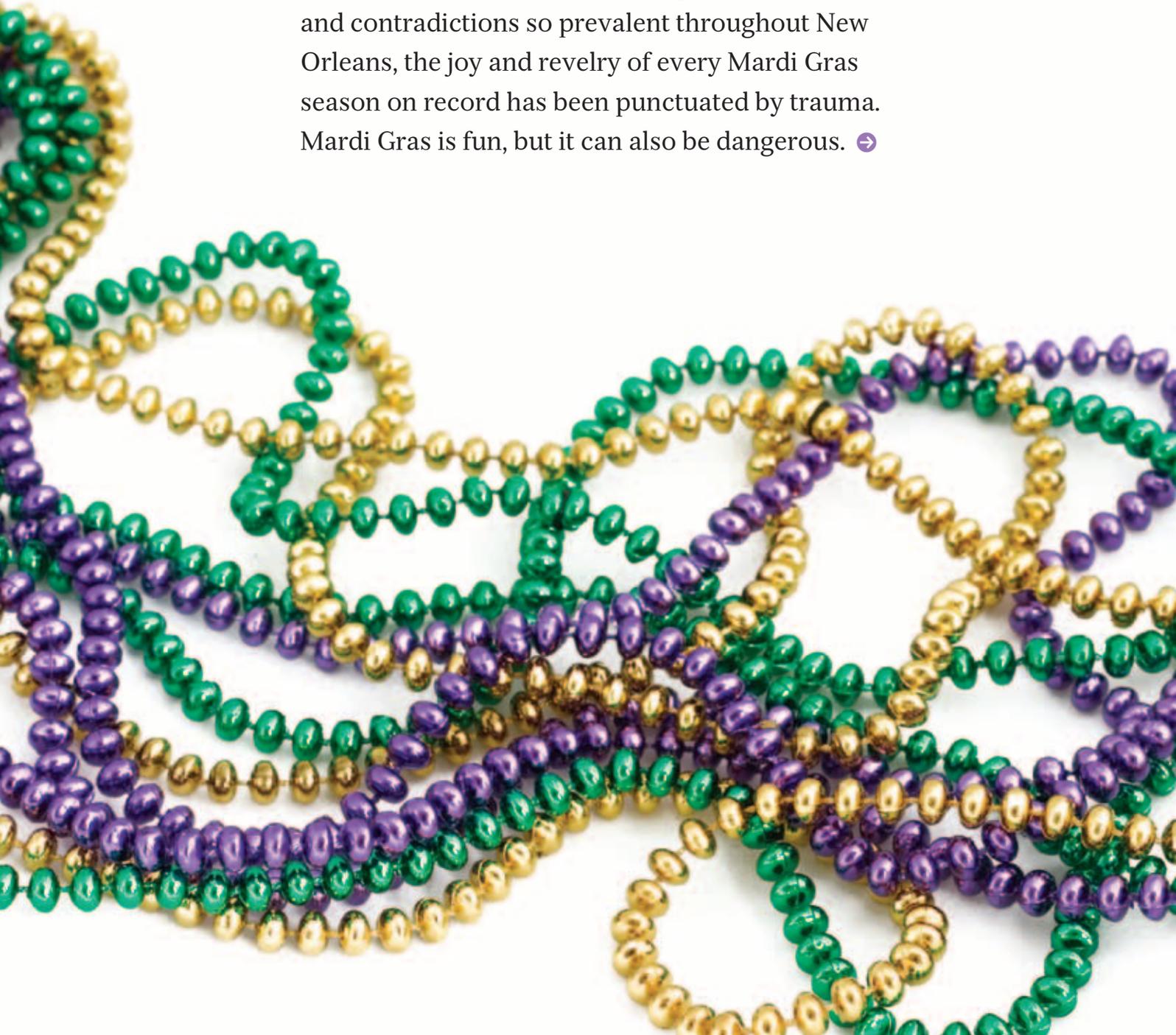


Ah, Carnival! The music, the parades, the streets full of costumed revelers—from St. Charles Avenue to Frenchmen Street to Claiborne Avenue under the overpass, Mardi Gras is a shimmering rainbow of traditions as diverse and lively as our city itself. In keeping with the contrasts and contradictions so prevalent throughout New Orleans, the joy and revelry of every Mardi Gras season on record has been punctuated by trauma. Mardi Gras is fun, but it can also be dangerous. →





IT'S *NOT* ALL “**Bon Temps**”

MARDI GRAS CAN PROVE HAZARDOUS

| By *Claudia S. Copeland, PhD*



It doesn't take long to find New Orleanians with stories of injuries directly related to Mardi Gras. Bywater artist Violet Skye described getting “smacked upside the head with a whole package of Muses toothbrushes. It was like getting hit with a brick, and my face hurt for a week.” Julie Condy, director of the Crescent City Lights Youth Theater, tells of a friend who “tripped when getting off a Muses float and broke her nose”. Opera singer Shelley James Burton retorts, “Does being kicked by children (who want to steal throws out of your hand) so hard that you bruise, rolling your ankle on discarded beer bottles, and having tobacco-smoke induced allergy attacks count?” Even the neighborhood walking parades have their hazards. Ms. Skye continues, “In St. Anne, we were walking with a



wagon with 3 kids in it and a canopy built into the top. A staggering drunk guy wearing only a loincloth and body paint did a face plant through the canopy into the wagon on top of the kids. The other dad may have injured said drunk guy trying to pull him out of the wagon, but the kids were generally ok.”

Of course, none of these folks ended up in the emergency room, and the vast majority



“By far, the most common type of injury directly related to Mardi Gras activities is eye injuries.”



of Mardi Gras injuries are treated with little more than aspirin, an ice pack, or just time. However, a substantial number of injuries are serious enough to warrant a visit to the hospital. According to the 2012 Louisiana Morbidity Report, there were 110 more emergency visits per day during Mardi Gras weekend than the daily average for the rest of the year. Several visits were specifically related to parades, chief among them being “marching in parade and became short of breath”; “fell off of dad’s/grandfather’s shoulders/neck”; “fell out of float”; “passed out at parade”; “head hit with coconut at parade”; and “swelling in eye hit at parade”. Parades also roll during holidays other than Mardi

Gras, and pediatrician Theresa Dise recalls one memorable St. Patrick’s Day parade-throw injury. “[The patient’s] mother was sitting in a lawn chair holding the baby and her husband was standing directly in front of her, and a cabbage flew over her husband and landed on the baby’s head. I believe she was around 4 weeks old at the time. She had a linear non-displaced skull fracture. Treatment was observation and she did fine.”

Occasionally, though, the injuries can be deadly. In 2008, an Endymion float rider exited his float prematurely and was crushed, and in 2005, a woman attending the Endymion Extravaganza fell from the Superdome’s second level to the floor while

watching the parade. Most injuries, however, are not notable enough to hit the newspapers. Nevertheless, they represent a sizable number of people suffering from trauma and distress.

By far, the most common type of injury directly related to Mardi Gras activities is eye injuries. Moshfeghi et al., a team of researchers from the Department of Ophthalmology at Tulane, found that eye injuries from objects thrown from floats during the major parades are quite common. Surveys of eight local emergency rooms found patients with corneal abrasion (a scratch in the transparent, outer layer of the center of the eye), conjunctival hyperemia (engorged blood vessels in the thin, clear membrane covering the “white” of the eye), subconjunctival hemorrhage (pooled blood below the conjunctiva, leading to bright red coloration in the whites of the eye), cell and flare (cells and protein in the anterior chamber of the eye), and eyelid laceration. These patients suffered from symptoms like pain, blurry vision, and sensitivity to light, among other annoyances. However, 18% of the patients seen had injuries that could be considered severe, including hyphemas (hemorrhage of the anterior chamber of the eye), which can result in permanent visual impairment if not treated properly, and open globe injuries (rupture of the eye). One of the open globe injuries eventually required removal of the eyeball. One of the researchers, Dr. Alan Fink, had conducted surveys previously, in 1986 and 1987, and also found severe injuries: two open globe injuries, a hyphema, and an orbital rim fracture. Injuries were distributed fairly evenly in terms of age, race, and gender, and about 30% of the injured were tourists. Fifty percent of the eye injuries were due to beads. The authors noted that “protective eyewear is not common during these events. Alcohol use, by contrast, was found to be prevalent among the injured patients.” While it is unlikely that parade-goers will start wearing protective eyewear any time soon, perhaps public reminders of the legitimate potential for eye trauma, especially to tourists and those planning on drinking, may help to prevent some of these injuries.

Ladder-related injuries are another



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Of all the activities that lead to injury during Carnival, though, there is none more deadly than drunk driving. ... Though not restricted to Mardi Gras, this dangerous practice increases substantially during Carnival.

serious parade-route concern. Tragically, in 1981, a child fell off a ladder placed right near the parade route, and was crushed. That prompted legislation compelling parents to place ladders back from the parade route, but enforcement is spotty at best. While no further deaths have occurred due to ladders, New Orleans emergency medical technicians respond to “their share of trauma calls from people falling off ladders,” according to EMSworld.

Councilwoman LaToya Cantrell, who represents the Uptown district where the majority of large parades roll, is moving forward with proposed changes that will address both the issue of ladder safety and eye injuries. The first proposed change would require that ladders be placed 10 feet from the curb, rather than the current requirement to place the ladders as many feet back as the ladder is high. That law has never been consistently enforced, and supporters of the change hope that a standard 10 feet rule will be easier to enforce, as there will be a single “line” beyond which ladders cannot be placed. Another proposed change addresses eye injuries and other injuries caused by flying objects: the creation of a weight limit for throws. This would stop the practice of throwing whole bags of beads (or Muses toothbrushes!), as well as other kinds of heavy objects. Finally, a more general proposal to prohibit parking on both sides of the parade route along St. Charles Ave. will allow better access for emergency personnel.

Some of the most disturbing incidents

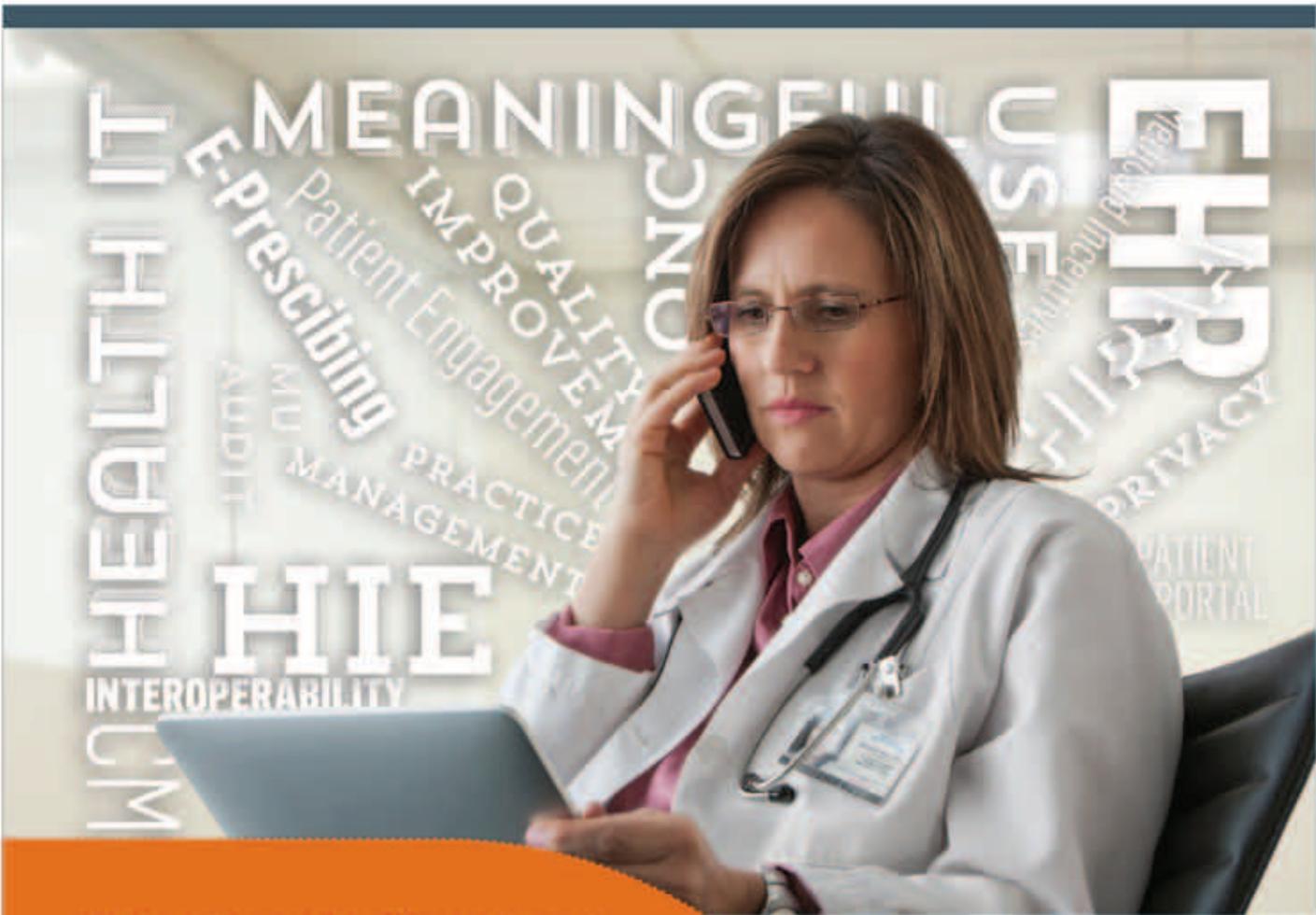
during Mardi Gras are those involving violence. A quadruple shooting this year on Bourbon Street, in the early evening when the street was full of people, was particularly shocking. The year before, two teens were shot at the edge of the French Quarter on Mardi Gras night, and another two were shot along the St. Charles parade route, leading to nationwide attention on the danger of visiting New Orleans for Mardi Gras. These types of incidents have occurred throughout the years, but each time a shooting like this happens, it is so shocking that it seems that violence during Mardi Gras is spinning out of control. Violence during Carnival, however, may actually be decreasing. According to Mayor Landrieu, crimes against persons during the Mardi Gras season were down 9% and property crimes were down 6% compared with the year before. Contrary to much popular belief, most shootings tend to be related to small-scale squabbles rather than gang warfare or crime aimed at strangers. A new strategy being rolled out by the Landrieu administration is more oriented toward this than traditional approaches have been. Officially called NOLA for Life, it seeks to impact violence by approaching it from a public health perspective. The strategy includes several programs, including ones focused on increasing teenage awareness of the consequences of criminal behavior, providing community conflict-resolution and trauma-counseling services, expanding mentoring programs, and improving job and housing opportunities for ex-offenders.

Other measures include increased detectives and a controversial 8 pm curfew for kids under 16 in the French Quarter and Marigny, unless they are accompanied by their parents.

Of all the activities that lead to injury during Carnival, though, there is none more deadly than drunk driving. According to the CDC, almost 30 people in the United States die every day in motor vehicle crashes that involve an alcohol-impaired driver. Though not restricted to Mardi Gras, this dangerous practice increases substantially during Carnival. Mardi Gras weekend in 2010 saw record numbers of auto accidents—509 crashes that resulted in injuries, including 11 deaths. In 2012, police and sheriffs throughout Louisiana started a new mandate to step up enforcement of drunk driving laws, including checkpoints, during the Mardi Gras season. Data from the CDC support this approach; they have calculated that sobriety checkpoints consistently reduce alcohol-related crashes, typically by 9%.

In addition to recommending sobriety checkpoints, the CDC also cites “putting health promotion efforts into practice” that influence the actions of community members as an effective measure to prevent drunk driving. This may be particularly important in New Orleans, where the attitude towards drinking is very open and tolerant. This tolerance can serve to support a festive, friendly, and fun atmosphere, but when it extends to driving, it can turn deadly. Changing this will require a fundamental change in consciousness such that concern about drunk driving is not equated with “uptight” attitudes about drinking. A simple message of “enjoy your cocktails, enjoy the party, but don’t get in your car afterwards” could work wonders if it could truly sink in.

Culture is hard to change, but the decrease in tobacco use over the years shows that it is possible. Effective public health campaigns can change behavior if the message gets through that the behavior is truly dangerous. Alongside this, alternatives such as increasing, rather than the current practice of decreasing, public transportation during Mardi Gras weekend would help to keep the festival safer. ■



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