



STUDENTS

This clinic's benefits are two-fold: FOR PATIENTS AND STUDENTS

By Andrea Kott, M.P.H.

It was two years in the planning, and was a cherished dream long before that: a student-run clinic in East Harlem, where poverty, illiteracy, inadequate healthcare access, language and cultural barriers render the community—largely indigent and underinsured—highly vulnerable to chronic disease. There medical students in their first and second years, eager for the chance to work with patients, could apply their classroom learning to heal people with real needs under the watchful eyes of attending physicians.



Meet the co-founders of La Casita de la Salud: Steven Leoniak and Andrew A. Chang are now third-year medical students, while Jessica Safra, Elissa Lapide and Megan Veresh are now fourth-years.

The dream realized is La Casita de la Salud, which celebrated its first anniversary in September. The center is not only exposing medical students to populations at risk for conditions such as asthma, diabetes, obesity, poor nutrition and hypertension; it is also teaching them about the direct interplay among illness, socioeconomic status and culture.

Pranav Mehta, M.D., is assistant professor of clinical medicine and of pediatrics, and assistant medical director for La Clinica del Barrio, Metropolitan Hospital's community-based clinic at 413 East 120th Street, which houses La Casita de la Salud. He says, "The clinic helps give students a snapshot of the health care disparities that often frustrate the profession. It's a good dose of reality."

Students also get the opportunity to work with underserved populations and to see how the experience differs from working with private pay patients, according to third-year medical student Andrew Chang, one of the clinic's founders and currently an on-site super-

visor. "The lack of healthcare access is such a rampant problem in the United States," says Chang. "I think it's really important to address the issue and expose students to it early in their medical careers, to show them it's great to get involved."

The idea for La Casita de la Salud, or "little house of health," began in 2003 when a group of medical students proposed the project to Ralph A. O'Connell, M.D., provost and dean of the School of Medicine. Members of the Class of 2007, Megan Veresh, Elissa Lapide, and Jessica Safra, wanted to volun-

teer in a student-run community clinic and had been researching clinics at other area medical schools. They attended a conference on how to start a student-run clinic sponsored by New York University and Albert Einstein medical schools, both of which have school clinics. Once they had the information they needed, they called a general meeting of all medical students in Valhalla. They established a steering committee with representatives from each class and formed a sub-committee to find a location.

Then they presented their plan to Dr. O'Connell who, in turn, brought it to Richard K. Stone, M.D. '68, senior associate dean at the College and medical director at Metropolitan Hospital. Excited about the idea, Dr. Stone immediately offered La Clinica del Barrio as a site for the student-run clinic. "Dr. Stone thought it was a great way to introduce medical students to the underserved community and provide more opportunities for hands-on clinical medicine," Chang said.

Dr. Stone arranged for the students to present their proposal to attending physicians, to get them on board as voluntary supervisors for one morning every three months. He also lined up two fellowships of \$2,100 each, funded by the Metropolitan Medical Board, for students eager to work on the project over the summer. Without the vigorous support of Dr. Stone and other physicians at Metropolitan Hospital, Chang says, “none of this would have happened.”

The clinic was an instant success, according to Dr. Mehta. “It exceeded our expectations,” he says of the clinic’s first year. “Patients have really enjoyed coming to the clinic. We’ve been able to meet their medical expectations. We’ve also helped them socially and this is very satisfying.”

“It’s been a year of learning,” says Stephanie Pepper, a second-year medical student who co-directs the clinic with Benita Liao, a fellow student from the Class of 2009. Starting with three to four patient visits per week, the clinic—which operates on Saturdays from 8 a.m. to noon—now sees five to six patients per week, most of whom are males seeking treatment for primary care issues, such as hypertension and high cholesterol.

Teams of medical students and at least one volunteer attending physician staff the clinic, taking patient histories, performing physical exams, making diagnoses and creating treatment plans. Medical student volunteers work on patient education teams as well, teaching patients about health issues—asthma, diabetes, obesity, cancer and heart disease—that are endemic to the East Harlem community they serve. “That’s what is unique about the clinic,” Dr. Mehta says. “We’re really bringing patient education to patients right there in the waiting areas.”



“The Little House of Health” is the English translation for the College’s first community clinic run by medical students, located in Spanish Harlem and part of Metropolitan Hospital’s La Clinica del Barrio.

There is also a medical student social service team that helps link patients to community organizations for more specialized support and care and evaluates patient eligibility for insurance programs. “We have students that purely take care of patients’ social needs,” Dr. Mehta says. “When patients are done with the medical part, they stop at the social service desk. We give referrals to social services and help get home attendants for elderly patients, as well as housing and food,” he adds.

Noting the importance of cultural competency, Chang says medical students need to understand how language barriers and fear of deportation can discourage people from trying to



Reporting for duty on a recent Saturday were Benita Liao and Stephanie Pepper, Class of ‘09, Lily Lam, M.D., Diana Velez, R.N., Elba Santiago, P.C.A., Pranav Mehta, M.D., and Megan Veresh, Class of ‘07.

use the healthcare system in the first place. That is why La Casita de la Salud has a paid Spanish-speaking professional medical interpreter on site at all times. “We are trying to make patients aware that medical care is available for them in a safe environment,” Chang says.

“By serving those in need, the clinic is helping to nurture students’ humanitarianism,” Dr. Mehta says. “It’s a great opportunity for students. It allows them to volunteer their time for a noble cause. As they go through medical school, we hope they will give back to the community, whether locally, nationally or internationally.”

The chance to support the community they work in draws students and physicians to the clinic, which is currently assessing how many volunteers it will need to treat more patients in the coming year. “Our goal is to increase the number of volunteer physicians, to broaden our patient population, improve community outreach efforts, improve clinic flow and patient follow up,” said Dr. Mehta, who says efforts are underway to create a data base that will reflect patient progress.

To increase community awareness about the clinic, Pepper says she and co-director Liao are collaborating with local churches and organizations on outreach efforts, including community health fairs and blood pressure screenings. The clinic is also trying to recruit more volunteer attending physicians. “In the area we’re serving, a lot of physicians are already doing so much community service,” Pepper says. Adds Chang: “One of the biggest challenges is to get attendings to volunteer. It’s a big commitment to have them be there at 8 or 9 a.m. on a Saturday morning and ask them to work for free,” he said.

But as far as Dr. Mehta is concerned, the rewards outweigh the sacrifices. “There is a not a word I can use to describe it,” he says. “It’s just gratifying to instill a sense of humanitarianism. You couldn’t ask for more.” ☺