



LA CASITA DE LA SALUD

AUGUST 17, 2010



A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTORS

Cliff Okada, MS II and Michael Weinreich, MS II

This past year, La Casita has seen many great changes and we are excited to work with all New York Medical College students, faculty, and administrators on our new projects. From an expanded volunteer pool, additional patient education presentations and children's games, and new community outreach programs, we are glad to report that our student-run clinic is making significant progress in improving the health of the East Harlem community.

As a health care provider to uninsured individuals, La Casita de la Salud also recognizes the need to find sustainable solutions for those without health insurance. As such, La Casita has reemphasized its relationship with Metropolitan Hospital to find long-term and financially beneficial medical coverage programs for its patients such as MetroPlus and Health and Hospitals Corporation (HHC) options. The redesigned community resources volunteer position now seeks not only to help La Casita patients find the appropriate community programs but also to guide them through the insurance registration process.

Our Grant's Committee has worked arduously to secure financing for novel programs

that will directly benefit the patient population. One of their major projects has been the development of a mental health screening plan to evaluate all La Casita patients for mental illness and depression. East Harlem has a clear need for additional mental health services, with a mental illness hospitalization rate of 2,283 per 100,000—a much higher rate than the rest of New York City. While we still eagerly await to hear about the acceptance of our grant, La Casita will be implementing its mental health program regardless of the grant's status.

Perhaps the biggest change coming to La Casita is its redefinition of the volunteering process. We realize that for many first years, coming to the clinic on a Saturday morning may seem like a chaotic and disorganized process. To encourage stability from week to week and encourage more intense participation, we are limiting the number of regular clinic volunteers to 36 per year. Of course anyone who wants to be involved can help out with any of our 11 committees or remain on the alternate list for clinic dates. We always encourage third/ fourth year students to volunteer as well. Students who complete 20 volunteer hours will

now have a Certificate of Volunteering Excellence sent to the Dean's office.

We have also made several smaller changes that you will be glad to hear about. For example, the often dreaded "front desk position" has been eliminated in favor of a more efficient patient registration process. The community outreach route has been updated and made more user-friendly through Google Maps. The outreach team has fostered an exciting partnership with the East Harlem Community Garden—a group with which we will hold health fairs with throughout the year. Finally, our physician coordinators have worked non-stop to find volunteer doctors that understand the importance of La Casita's mission and are excited to mentor young medical students.

We hope that everyone at NYMC has a chance to be involved with La Casita this year and help make a difference in a severely underserved community. We encourage you to visit our new website at www.nymc.edu/student_clinic to learn more about all of our on-going activities. Hope to see you at La Casita this fall!

MISSION STATEMENT

La Casita de la Salud, a student-run medical clinic, is bridging the gap in health-care disparities. We care for the uninsured, undocumented, and underprivileged individuals of East Harlem by providing quality and culturally competent care for all patients regardless of the ability to pay, with an emphasis on preventative medicine while educating medical students to the complex needs of underserved communities.

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A SATURDAY MORNING IN HARLEM

Brandon Chen, MS II and Amrit Chiluwal, MS II

Only a select few are fortunate enough to have a clear understanding of themselves and the world around them. For these individuals, every action has a logical rationale behind it. Unfortunately, we are not these people. And so for our first trip to La Casita, neither of us were cognizant of our motivations to wake up so early on a Saturday morning. We cannot tell you the smell of the air or the color of the leaves on that day. Nor did we channel wisdom and strength from the many medical students before us who had made that same trip. At the time, the day held no special meaning or significance to us—we were simply medical students volunteering at the student-run clinic.

There we were, in Harlem, armed only with a mediocre understanding of medicine from the first two blocks of medical school courses. Our task for the day—patient education. Somehow, we were responsible for teaching and

raising awareness about conditions like asthma, diabetes, hypertension and breast cancer to the numerous Spanish speaking patients and their families. It was just our luck that neither of us spoke Spanish!

After setting up the projector at the back of the waiting room, we began our rather awkward presentations—projecting the Spanish PowerPoint version while addressing the audience in English. Amrit cheerfully introduced us and proceeded to begin a lecture on the hazards of obesity. The patients stared blankly at us and started migrating to the front of the waiting room one by one until the back was completely empty. Clearly this was not response we were hoping for.

Thankfully, our efforts that morning were not entirely met with futility. As the morning progressed, using a mixture of hand gestures, spo-

ken English, and a sprinkle of Spanish words here and there, we were able to attract a sizable number of interested patients. One kind elderly man sat through several of our talks, and became animatedly amused when he was informed that men should have no more than 2 drinks per day on average. One woman requested a presentation on breast cancer, which we enthusiastically provided along with additional packets of information on the topic. In an attempt to build rapport, Amrit even asked one young girl if her baby brother was her child, to which she responded with scorn (another story for another day). At the end of the morning, we struck up a conversation with a man from Ecuador who had brought his girlfriend to the clinic. It was surprising that he seemed equally interested in us as medical students as we were in his life.

These anecdotal interactions, though brief, proved that these patients were just ordinary people with ordinary families and needs just like any one of us, except that they did not have anywhere to turn to for their healthcare concerns. Although we did not leave the clinic with a grandeur understanding of the medical field nor was it apparent to us what exactly we had learned that morning, we are certain that it was an experience that we were glad to have gotten. We felt more than just a simple satisfaction of having volunteered. We felt that we made a meaningful contribution to people who would have limited access to healthcare were it not for free clinics like La Casita. And it reminded us that soon we would have the knowledge and skills to help these people in ways no one but a doctor can; a realization that is powerful and yet, humbling.

CARE FOR THE UNINSURED

Jennifer M. Thomas, MS IV and Gordon M. Burke, MS IV

Following his appointment, J.G. sat patiently across the clinic's waiting room while we began to shut down La Casita de la Salud's operations. We had seen J.G. before—he was a 17-year old uninsured immigrant from Puerto Rico who frequently visited La Casita. Having been diagnosed with Juvenile Huntington's Disease (juvenile HD) six years ago, his disease had become dramatically worse over the last three years. Juvenile HD is a devastating disease where the patient suffers from progressive loss of motor function, in addition to severe decline in mental abilities and behavior.

Nearby, his uncle gently approached us at the front desk with hand extended and we took a moment to speak with him. His uncle had heard about La Casita from a co-worker at his construction company and searched us out for help with his nephew. J.G. was not able to receive medical care because of his lack of insurance. Although the available treatment provides minimal benefit in prognosis, La Casita was able to grant counseling and answer questions regarding his condition to both him and his family. As we paused for a moment to speak with J.G.'s uncle, the only words he

could say over again were those of thanks.

This is not an unusual scenario for the students of La Casita de la Salud, New York Medical College's student-run clinic. Our clinic is fortunate that it provides real-world experiences for our students. It not only provides health care to the underserved, but it also shows students the impact that they may have in the life of their patients. Students can learn from an early point in their careers on how to handle sensitive situations, such as in the case with J.G. In return, our patients are receiving care that

they would otherwise not obtain and are immensely appreciative. Students learn that their roles as health care physicians extend past the examination room and into the way of life of their patients. By linking our textbook learning with our emotions, students understand the impact they have and receive a taste of what is to come in their careers.

Excerpt from "Care for the Uninsured: A Year of Review for La Casita de la Salud" (Quill & Scope, 2009) with permission from the writers

