

Learning the Art of Medicine: Meeting the True Needs of Patients

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Being a physician requires a deep sense of empathy and compassion for others. However, with the academic stress that comes with medical school, the art of caring for people can sometimes be forgotten. Patient care is the primary reason why most physicians choose this career, but sadly, the scientific side of medicine often blurs that vision. The Student-Faculty Collaborative Practice at University of Texas (UT) Health San Antonio plays a crucial role in the journey of many aspiring physicians, nurses, dentists, pharmacists, and physical therapists, giving students the unique opportunity of interacting with patients firsthand and giving them a glimpse of what the medical profession truly entails.

Housed under the renowned Center for Medical Humanities and Ethics at UT Health San Antonio, the Student-Faculty Collaborative Practice seeks to mirror the mission of this department, preparing tomorrow's healers to act with compassion and justice. The Student-Faculty Collaborative Practice is extremely unique from many other programs around the country. Not only are there six free clinics across the city of San Antonio, but they all serve six vastly different populations and communities. With the help of medical and nursing faculty, each of these clinics was created by medical students who saw a need in the community and made a focused effort to meet this need. Several clinic coordinators were asked to share about their clinics and how they function to meet the diverse needs of the different patient populations.

Alpha Home Clinic

In 2005, the Alpha Home Clinic was the first student-run free clinic affiliated with UT Health San Antonio to open its doors. Alpha Home is a

women's treatment center for alcohol and drug abuse that focuses on providing a pathway of help, hope, and healing through spiritual-based treatment and support. This clinic provides women's health screenings, primary care, and psychiatric care for its residents.

Daniel Anderson, the medical student clinic coordinator, shares that he is "grateful to see these women work their way through recovery after coming from a population where many women lack insurance and have never had continuous care from a physician." In medicine, sometimes the smallest intervention can change a person's life for good. Anderson highlights, "One woman came in with severe anxiety and depression and was struggling to find joy in her life. Over the course of the program and several medication adjustments, she had a complete change in her demeanor and expressed that she was able to feel happiness again." A simple case of medicine management and recovery support was all this patient needed to get back up and continue on walking through life.

San Antonio Metropolitan Ministry

The next clinic to open was within the San Antonio Metropolitan Ministry (SAMM) network's Transitional Living and Learning Center, a local two-year program that offers housing to families transitioning out of homelessness. The clinic opened in 2005 to provide primary care to residents, most of whom are uninsured women and children.

Medical student clinic coordinator, Mitchell Parma, explains how "families show up at SAMM often shaken up and broken, and as a consequence, they put their own health on the

back burner to try to make ends meet.” He says, “The clinic serves as a constant reminder that having a clean bill of health allows them to give their full self to their families and work.” He tells the story of a young mother who was found to be malnourished, needing nutritional supplement drinks. As it turned out, she was unable to purchase the drinks because she was uninsured and didn’t have the money. Jumping on the opportunity to help her, the clinic provided the supplemental drinks she needed to receive proper nutrition. Parma remembers, “She started crying in disbelief that someone had gone out of their way to provide something so simple yet so necessary.” Something as basic as nutrition can be stripped away by unfortunate life circumstances, and it is our duty, as healthcare providers, to provide such basic necessities if we have the means.

Travis Park Dermatology Clinic

In 2009, the Travis Park Dermatology Clinic opened in downtown San Antonio at Travis Park United Methodist Church. The clinic coordinators, Kavina Patel and Giselle Castillo, describe the patient population as “underserved, uninsured patients” who “don’t have primary care physicians, much less a dermatologist.”

The clinic sees around 25-30 patients per clinic night and is able to treat a variety of conditions such as eczema, psoriasis, contact dermatitis, and many others. The homeless population is at an increased risk for skin disease due to increased exposure to the elements, poor hygiene, and lack of access to medical care. In a place like San Antonio, with scorching temperatures for much of the year, the homeless population is incredibly vulnerable to skin conditions, like skin cancer.

Haven for Hope

To expand our effort in treating dermatological concerns in the homeless, the fourth student-run free clinic opened at the homeless shelter and transitional center, Haven for Hope, in 2010. People from all over San Antonio and South Texas come to Haven for Hope to stay for a night

in “the courtyard” or to participate in the transitional programs that support people and help them get back on their feet again.

Tommy Pham is the medical student clinic coordinator and explains that “on any given night, there is an estimated 3,000 people experiencing homelessness in San Antonio, and Haven is equipped to serve up to 1,700 people.” He goes on to say, “The Haven for Hope clinic has been able to look patients in their eyes and care for them in the best way possible.” By spending time serving vulnerable populations, we allow ourselves the opportunity to be reminded that, as healthcare professionals, we are entering into a sacred bond with our patients, experiencing their lives as if it were our own, and reaching out a hand of hope and healing.

San Antonio Refugee Health Clinic

In partnership with the St. Francis Episcopal Church and Neighbors Helping Neighbors Foundation, the San Antonio Refugee Health Clinic began operating in 2012 with the goal of “serving as an initial trustworthy location for refugees to overcome access barriers and address health care needs” and “in the long term, to connect refugees to existing health services in a sustainable way.”

Ronald Scott, the nursing student clinic coordinator, explains how “refugees settled in San Antonio often come with no English language experience and too few resources to navigate the healthcare system.” The clinic works with the Center for Refugee Services to meet these needs and in many cases serves as “their only source of primary care.” Ronald describes a case that impacted him while working at the clinic: “While we were getting a patient’s health history, we learned that her oldest son – her only connection in the States and primary source of income – had died suddenly the previous year. As she told us this story through an interpreter, her emotion was so palpable that we all fell silent. For the remainder of the visit, we sat with her and comforted her as if she were our own mother.” Sometimes medicine is a lot less about providing

a treatment and is more about being present with our patients, enduring their pain with them and assuring that someone is with them to sit in the silence that pain can bring. Moving forward, the Refugee Clinic was also able to connect her with the resources she needed to navigate the healthcare system on her own.

Pride Community Clinic

Most recently, the Pride Community Clinic began seeing patients in 2017 and aims to serve the LGBTQ+ community of San Antonio. Much of the patient population seen are transgender patients.

Jessica Hill, one of their medical student clinic coordinators, explains that “there are very few providers of hormone replacement therapy in San Antonio for patients who are insured and there are no providers for the uninsured. We are able to see many of our patients for multiple visits since we start hormone replacement therapy and continue to follow them until we can find a stable provider.” Jessica describes how “patients transform” and notes her experience with one particular patient: “When she first saw us, she was quiet and hesitant, scared to draw attention to herself for fear that someone may recognize that she is transgender. She was struggling to

find a job because interviewing was such an intimidating process. After months of hormone replacement therapy, we got to meet the real version of our patient—a strong, confident woman who finally wore the pencil skirt and heels she had dreamed of. She aced her interview, got a stable job, and now lights up a room with her giant smile.” To better meet the undeniable need in the community, this clinic seeks to train additional physicians in hormone replacement therapy in an effort to minimize this huge barrier to access of care that transgender people experience in San Antonio.

There is a common theme across all six clinics: students saw a need in the community, and they chose to do something about it. These clinics are a place for students to learn the true art of medicine, where compassion and justice are at the forefront of patient-centered healthcare grounded on the foundation of medical knowledge. Dr. Richard Usatine, Family Medicine faculty member and the founder of the Student-Faculty Collaborative Practice, wisely sums it up: “You don’t need a board certification to be able to care for someone. All you need is to meet them where they are and listen to them.”