

Community-Based Learning

Upstate Medical Students examine primary care for the often forgotten.

Healthcare for the Homeless

His short white coat is still crisp and new. His second semester of medical school is barely underway. But Andrew Schmitt of Cooperstown is already stationed on the front lines of a vital battle—to bring basic health care to the homeless and most marginalized members of the Syracuse community.

Schmitt volunteers at the weekly, walk-in Amaus Health Services clinic at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in downtown Syracuse. He works under the wing of Amaus medical director Lynn Beth Satterly, MD, MS, assistant professor of family medicine at Upstate.

“I am the first medical person to meet with the patients,” says Schmitt, now a second-year student, whose parents are both nurses. “I take their vitals and health histories for Dr. Satterly. I try to get a sense of what’s going on with each patient.”

Even more important, Schmitt is gaining a sense of what’s amiss in American health care. It’s a birds-eye view of the complexity and the perils of a system that leaves 47 million people without health insurance, he says.

By design, medical students inch slowly toward the practice of medicine. They spend most of their first two years in the classrooms and labs, studying science before they meet patients. Even then, their standard role is to shadow attending physicians. “As a medical student, you are a fly on the wall. You stand back and observe,” explains Schmitt.

At Amaus, he feels privileged to work face-to-face with patients—and to work on the patients’ turf. “In a teaching hospital,” Schmitt says, “you always have a line of residents and interns in front of you. At Amaus, I can actually do something to help.”

To pave the way for Satterly, Schmitt checks each patient from head to toe, reviewing systems and symptoms, especially as they relate



to the reason for the visit. As he pieces together a patient’s (often complex) medical history, Schmitt is learning to triage and prioritize, both critical assessment tools.

“I’m asking myself, ‘Is this patient stable medically? Mentally? Is this something we can safely deal with at the clinic? Should we be calling an ambulance to take him to University hospital?’”

Schmitt calls Amaus a provocative classroom and Dr. Satterly a wonderful teacher. “This experience really gives you something to think about. Not just in terms of medicine, but policy issues and barriers to health care,” he says. “I’ve learned that simple things, like not having a calendar to record doctors’ appointments or a refrigerator to store medications, can lead to serious medical problems.”

—Denise Owen Harrigan

Help Wanted: *The Amaus clinic is currently running thanks to an all volunteer staff and donated supplies and medications. The clinic seeks retired or available physicians to help expand its availability to the need in our community as well as facilitate the high demand our students have shown to volunteer in the community. Monetary donations are also appreciated and will be used to establish a foundation at Upstate for the clinic. Please contact Dr. LynnBeth Satterly at SatterLL@upstate.edu or the clinic at 315/424-1911 for more information.*

Health Care Behind Bars

Last summer, Diane St. Fleur encountered a person who was able to count on three meals a day and access to a doctor, but only because he was in jail. The fact that his plight is shared by many both distresses and inspires St. Fleur, a third-year SUNY Upstate medical student who did research on health care at the Justice Center in downtown Syracuse and at nearby Jamesville Penitentiary.

St. Fleur worked under the direction of James Greenwald, MD ’78, medical director for correctional health and associate professor of family medicine at Upstate, and at the request of the Onondaga County Health Department (OCHD), which conducts annual quality improvement reviews of all its services, including health care at local jails.

According to OCHD protocols, each of the thousands of people who go through the Justice Center is seen by a Health Department nurse at booking and receives a complete physical within two weeks of incarceration.

To help analyze the efficiency of the process, St. Fleur had the daunting task of collecting data from hundreds of patients’ files and sick-call request forms.

“There’s a lot of record keeping,” notes St. Fleur, “and much of it is paper based.”

In addition to collecting data, she joined Dr. Greenwald and an OCHD physician-assistant on twice-weekly patient rounds at the jails, where she observed that Greenwald treated all the incarcerated men with respect, and they responded.

St. Fleur interviewed patient inmates, wrote medical histories, took blood pressures and checked heart rates and temperatures. She was confident in the job, thanks to skills she developed during the first-year Practice of Medicine course, taught by a team of faculty members including Cynthia Morrow, MD, OCHD Commissioner of Health.

After several months of patient visits, data collection and analysis, St. Fleur presented her research findings to Greenwald and the OCHD staff.

What did St. Fleur find? “I saw the same medical conditions that were prevalent in society as a whole, particularly among minority groups—lots of diabetes, hypertension, and asthma,” she reports. “And a number of cancer cases. Some patients were treated for injuries from assault. Many of the incarcerated have mental health conditions and are often untreated until they arrive in jail.”

For the most part, efficient procedures are in place, St. Fleur says. “Dr. Greenwald helped me with the overall analysis and recommended a new, easier process for the nurse, physician, and physician’s assistant to consult with each other on specific patients,” she says.

Most importantly, St. Fleur presented the need to invest in an electronic database to replace the current paper-based system.

With these findings, OCHD obtained state funding to begin the transition to electronic records and is pursuing grant funding to complete the project.

—Susan Keeter

