The Community-wide Impact of Student-Run Clinics

Nona Bhatia

INTRODUCTION

UC Davis has been operating student-run clinics for the past 35 years in order to provide free and quality health care for the uninsured and underinsured populations of Sacramento. There are currently seven clinics that cater to distinct groups of patients and offer culturally sensitive treatment, although no uninsured individual is turned away. The patients are often part of marginalized populations and would not have access to health care if not for the services that these clinics provide. In addition to benefitting the underserved populations of Sacramento, the clinics allow medical students and undergraduates from UC Davis to work with patients and obtain hands-on experience. Local physicians are also on site each clinic day, supervising students and seeing patients. The clinics act to unite individuals who are passionate about medicine and service, in order to provide support to the greater Sacramento area in the form of health care. In this manuscript, I will discuss the overall impact of the student-run clinics on the community surrounding UC Davis, specifically focusing on the benefits for patients, doctors, and students, in hopes that a larger proportion of medical schools will set up a similar system, or expand upon the current system in their own cities of operation.

FOR PATIENTS

The UC Davis student-run clinics are committed to providing their patients with the culturally sensitive health care that they might not otherwise be able to receive due to economic, social, or cultural barriers. Each of the seven clinics focuses on serving a specific population and offer resources that cater to the health-related needs of the target population. For example, Clinica Tepatí mainly serves the Latino community of the greater Sacramento area, and has Spanish translators available in order to allow for effective communication between patients, volunteer students, and doctors. Many of the clinics have translators, who are often undergraduate students, in order to diminish language barriers and ensure that patients have adequate access to any health related resources that they might need. Access to these translating services largely influence the ability of recent immigrants to obtain basic forms of health care while at the clinics. Thus, I find it reasonable to encourage medical schools across the country to implement and expand upon their own student-run clinic system in order to include resources tailored to the specific needs of the locals. Culturally sensitive care could serve to increase patient satisfaction and comfort for those who regularly take advantage of clinic services.

Although the Affordable Care Act (ACA) was passed in order to mitigate the amount of uninsured individuals in the United States, it does not provide universally affordable and accessible health care. Indeed the ACA has made a substantial impact by reducing the number of uninsured individuals in the United States by about 25%, but it still leaves roughly 30 million uninsured. Accessibility and cost remain as factors that prevent many patients from taking advantage of the benefits of the ACA. Many recent immigrants face lack of access to transportation, language skills, or resources to sign up for insurance that are not within the purview of the ACA. This is where we have seen the student-run clinics play a beneficial role. The clinics are able to provide a safe and comfortable atmosphere for those individuals who are not covered by the ACA. Therefore, the passing of the Affordable Care Act should not dissuade medical schools from setting up student-run clinics. Instead, it should encourage them to accommodate to the needs of the particular populations of patients who remain uninsured. Student-run clinics are able to act as a stepping-stone towards universal health care becoming a reality in the United States.

FOR PHYSICIANS

Student-run clinics additionally benefit the physicians who volunteer their time to serve their community. Their role as “preceptors” allows them to contribute to the education of the future doctors of America by working alongside premedical and medical students and supplementing their learning processes with personal experiences and advice. Physicians are also able to serve their community in a familiar atmosphere without having to worry about insurance related paper work, which may cause them to divert their full attention from the patient. These clinics allow preceptors to put their full focus into catering to the patients’ needs while simultaneously mentoring the medical students.

Furthermore, physicians are able to utilize the support of an entire clinic personnel in order to launch their own ideas for service-oriented projects. A year ago in the aftermath of the disastrous flood in Kashmir, Dr. Yasmeen (current medical director of Shifa Community Clinic) requested clinic volunteers to help her raise funds for the victims. A donation table was set up at a local mosque in Sacramento, where many enthusiastic community members were more than willing to contribute to the cause. This event not only aided in providing relief to the victims in Kashmir, but also presented one of Shifa Clinic’s physicians with the means to pursue a service related project that might have otherwise been difficult to put
together. Student-run clinics can provide physicians with the resources they need in order to further the beneficial impact they have on their communities, and even communities abroad.

FOR STUDENTS
Volunteering at the clinics also influences the medical and undergraduate students who put much of their time and effort into being part of a clinic. Students in their first and second years of medical school are able to obtain early clinical exposure and valuable hours being mentored by physicians. This enhances their confidence when working with patients and could potentially increase their desire to specialize in primary care, which in turn could mitigate the primary care shortage that our nation currently faces. Student-run clinics are an excellent way to supplement the medical students’ in-class education with community-based learning, while simultaneously improving their professional skills and attitudes.

Like the physicians, the undergraduate students similarly benefit from professional interactions at the clinics. Clinical work provides UC Davis undergraduates with the invaluable opportunity of working alongside physicians and medical students in order to serve their community in a professional medical setting. Raya Aliakbar, fundraising coordinator of Imani Clinic, elaborates on a few of the many ways in which being a part of clinic impacts undergraduate students and states, “As pre-medical students, we learn in the classroom academically, and see an idealized version of medicine and health. Through student-run clinics, we gain hands-on experience, which shows us that medicine these days is a cross-section of science and humanity. Volunteers learn not only about the diagnosis, but how to interact with patients, and more importantly, how to be an active community member that helps patients both inside of the exam room and out”. Clinical work allows undergraduates to personally experience how healthcare and health education can change a patient’s life for the better, and often motivates students to pursue medicine so that they can continue to support underserved populations in a similar manner.

CONCLUSION
In summary, the student-run clinics at UC Davis have made a lasting impact on the patients, physicians, and students within the community. Although the Affordable Care Act has been passed in order to alleviate the number of uninsured individuals across the nation, there are a variety of factors that still prevent people from obtaining health insurance. This means that a need for student-run clinics and the culturally sensitive services that they provide remains, and it could be very beneficial for a more extensive number of medical schools to set up a similar system in their cities of operation. Many medical schools currently have student-run clinics, but it would be in the best interest of the community to cater to the specific cultural needs of the local populations. The student-run clinics here at UC Davis have definitely made a lasting impact on the quality of health care in regards to the underserved populations of Sacramento, and it would be incredible to see similar programs spread to medical schools across the nation.

REFERENCES