



Volunteers in Medicine: A Culture of Caring

By Kristin Dwyer, Staff Writer

Dr. Randle of Mississippi spent his career as a physician in internal medicine until his retirement two years ago. During this time, Randle saw a growing need in his community to support the medical care needs of those who were uninsured due to self-employment, low-wage jobs and the high costs of medical insurance. He found that many individuals had no access to preventative care and were avoiding treatment at the point of serious illness, which ultimately led them to larger health crises. As a result, Randle and his colleagues, other retired professionals, churches, community leaders and local businesses in Oxford stepped forward to open a Volunteers in Medicine Clinic that offers quality care to those without health insurance.

Retirement has opened new doors for Dr. Randle and he has found many benefits in serving as a volunteer physician at the Oxford Medical Ministries Clinic. "It keeps my mind active and is a wonderful way to keep me engaged in life. I have a reason to get up in the morning. It is satisfying and very meaningful to continue caring for patients and to alleviate their distress in this gratifying environment. This is a great way to carry out what I was truly trained to do as a physician and it is liberating to practice without the barriers of paperwork, time-limited appointments and strict reimbursement guidelines. Everyone would agree that our health care system is in trouble and Volunteers in Medicine is an opportunity for citizens to try and rectify our health care needs, one community at a time." Randle chooses to spend at least two days a week at the clinic plus one evening offering direct patient care, reviewing charts and lab work and writing prescriptions. He especially praises the dedication

and compassionate spirit of the team of volunteers that make the Oxford Clinic a successful outreach program to those in need of care.

The current statistics are alarming; 48 million people in the U.S. have no medical insurance and another 25 million are underinsured, comprised mostly of middle and higher income families. As the country faces deep economic impacts in the new year, along with increased job losses, partnerships with established resources might be one solution to our healthcare crisis. The Volunteers in Medicine (VIM) program is an integral part of this nationwide solution.

Volunteers in Medicine began in 1994 in Hilton Head, South Carolina. One out of three people on the island did not have access to health care. Simultaneously, a group of retired health care professionals were interested in continuing to utilize their medical skills in a part-time, volunteer capacity. The union of these two groups created the first VIM clinic, which is a nonprofit free clinic. The VIM model underscores the importance of using retired medical professionals to provide essential health care services in free community-based clinics for medically underserved and uninsured individuals.

Currently, in the U.S., there are over 70 VIM clinics now established in 23 states and this program is the only national nonprofit dedicated to assisting communities in developing free clinics. According to Amy Hamlin, executive director of Volunteers in Medicine, "No community can be truly healthy if a significant portion of the population is excluded from basic health care services. Volunteers in Medicine is one solution to offering health

care to everyone, in the absence of a national health policy. In addition, empowering retired physicians to practice medicine without the challenges of the red tape and insurance paperwork is the practical approach offered by VIM." A new trend is beginning to emerge. This year alone, VIM clinics are reporting a 30-50 percent increase in demand for services due to the recent economic downturn. Many of those served are self-employed and in the middle class. Unfortunately, the contributions and donations heavily relied upon for clinic support have shown a decrease of 20 percent.

The value of continued caregiving throughout the retirement years is priceless. Retired medical personnel are a vital, untapped resource and may be one of our nation's best kept secrets. Retirement, although eagerly sought after over a lifetime, can bring about feelings of disappointment and a loss of worth and purpose in everyday life. Many older adults mistakenly retire "from" a career instead of retiring "to" another purposeful activity beyond golf, travel and card clubs. One of the losses physicians may experience, for example, is their self-image and identity as a healer. In addition, work provides a place to "go" each day and a significant loss can occur when there is suddenly no need or expectation to be some place. Grief and loss can occur, yet finding new identities and productivity in volunteering can greatly ease these feelings.

Retired medical professionals such as physicians, nurses, dentists, social workers, dieticians, or pharmacists and non-medical professionals such as chaplains and clerical staff are often looking for meaningful ways to continue serving, practicing their skills and sharing their lifetime of knowledge. Serving in a VIM clinic is one way to fulfill these personal service goals. These professionals have already spent a lifetime caring for others and now have an opportunity to serve once again, only in an enhanced volunteer capacity with a flexible and less demanding schedule.

Not all clinic volunteers are retired medical personnel. Some are still in the workforce fulltime, yet find it rewarding to share their skills in a VIM clinic after hours. Volunteers find many benefits of serving in a relaxed and respectful environment where they can spend time on their own terms. The clinics are patient-focused; thus there is an absence of the fast-paced schedule seen in primary care clinics that have to rely on paid services and daily quotas. Volunteers are able to schedule their own time; however, a minimum of one half day per week is recommended and current medical licensure and continuing education credits are required of all professional volunteers. Some patients themselves become clinic volunteers in non-patient care, and give back in response to the support and care they have received. The result is a win-win situation as these professional and non-professional caregivers



continue to extend their hands toward the needs of others in the community. This model allows for the circle of care to be completed.

The mission of the VIM national office is to guide and promote the development of a national network of free clinics using retired medical and lay volunteers who share the vision to provide care to America's uninsured within a culture of caring atmosphere. The "Culture of Caring" motto is the heart and soul of a VIM clinic and is based on an ethical standard in medicine. It emphasizes the worth and dignity of each patient, recognizing that it often takes great courage to seek help due to unforeseen circumstances such as job and benefit losses.

The future and success of VIM clinics lies in the hands of visionary leaders and caring individuals in communities that see the need to offer health care in a whole new light. The commitment to make these free clinics a reality will remove barriers and close the gap between patients and their medical needs. Volunteers in Medicine are caregiving heroes that make an incredible difference in the lives of others. While the need for quality health care in our nation will no doubt continue to be in high demand, there is now hope to provide a local solution to a national problem.

For more information on this program, a list of member clinics or to start a clinic in your community, you may go to www.volunteersinmedicine.org or call (802) 651-0112.

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