Making Teen Parts of the Solution: The Westminster Free Clinic Model

With a shortage of physicians and nurses looming, Westminster Free Clinic provides a case study on how to recruit teenagers to the medical profession.

Americans may soon face a shortage of physicians that will make it hard to find convenient, quality health care. According to a March 2005 USA Today article, unless the United States starts producing more doctors, the shortage will worsen as 79 million baby boomers reach retirement age and demand more medical care.¹

In January 2005, the Council on Graduate Medical Education (COGME) released its 16th Report, “Physician Workforce Policy Guidelines for the United States, 2000-2020” recommending an increase of 3,000 medical school graduates by 2015 in order to meet rising demand and need. Only under the most optimistic of various supply and demand scenarios outlined in the report would the nation have an adequate supply to meet demand in the year 2020. When the midpoints of the projected supply and demand scenarios outlined in the report are used, the net result is a projected shortage of about 85,000 physicians in 2020 – which is equivalent to approximately ten percent of today’s physician workforce.²

In 2004, Merritt, Hawkins & Associates, a health care staffing and consulting firm, published, “Will the Last Physician in America Please Turn off the Lights? A Look at America’s Looming Doctor Shortage.” The authors predict there will be a shortage of 90,000 to 200,000 physicians and that average wait times for medical specialties are likely to increase dramatically beyond the current range of two to five weeks. Various factors, including the demise of managed care, the aging of the population, changing practice patterns, increasing regulation and paperwork are some of the reasons cited for the impending shortage.³

"Almost everyone agrees we need more physicians," says Carl Getto, chair of the Council on Graduate Medical Education, a panel Congress created to recommend how many doctors the nation needs, "the debate is over how many.” ⁴

“Hispanics will be especially hard hit," says Dr. Elena Rios, president of the National Hispanic Medical Association (NHMA). "There already are too few Hispanic doctors, and without federal action, we can't recruit more Latino doctors to meet today's demand -- much less tomorrows." The
U.S. Hispanic population has nearly doubled since 1990 to about 43 million and it is projected to reach 102.6 million by 2050.  

“As our nation grows increasingly diverse, so should our health care providers. But the reality is that millions of Latinos and other communities of color face cultural and linguistic barriers to health care,” says Rep. Hilda Solis (D-CA). "Without action to increase the diversity of our work force and break down barriers to care, our health care crisis will continue to escalate, placing at risk the health of millions.” 

Included in the overall physician shortage, is a significant decline in primary care physicians. It is both difficult to recruit family practice residents, to train them, and to retain them in the field after training. Many factors contribute to this including:

- High medical school tuition debt (difficult to repay)
- Work hours and call hours longer than other fields of the profession
- Greater pay in other fields of medicine

There is also a significant shortage of nurses with a large number of current licensed RN's soon to retire and a change in federal and state law for nurse to patient ratios in both hospitals and skilled nursing facilities.

Part of a Solution: The Westminster Free Clinic

In 1994, Dr. Kamajian founded The Westminster Free Clinic (WFC). WFC is a grass roots health care provider that is driven and empowered by volunteers. The clinic serves over 5,000 local working poor families and addresses a broad spectrum of public health and health care issues. This program includes free patient care, prescriptions, resource and referral, advocacy, free legal services, bilingual counseling and dental screening services as well as training opportunities for teens and college students.
The clinic staff volunteers currently consist of:

- 18 doctors
- 10 pharmacists
- 8 RN's
- 2 dentists
- 2 health educators
- 2 physical therapists
- 1 chiropractor
- 1 lawyer for the clients
- 1 mental health counselor

HEALTH Matters Teen Training Program

Three years after the clinic started, a volunteer's teenager asked me if she could help at the clinic and from there it cascaded. Students from virtually every high school in the area began to volunteer. In fact, so many students showed up each week, that Dr. Kamajian started a formal program. The students are given a lot of responsibility, from taking the initial history to giving out the pharmaceuticals; they are very much involved in patient care. Each student volunteer has an allotted time in the clinic and is assigned to a certain crew. Every crew has a student supervisor and is carefully overseen by adult volunteers.

Over 70 local public and private high school students interested in careers in health care volunteer for the HEALTH Matters Teen Training Program at the clinic for a minimum of two years from 5pm to 10:30 pm Wednesday nights. Participating students are referred through 72 public and private high school students in the WFC student volunteer program, primarily from East Ventura County. Half of the students are talented bi-lingual youths who will be the first in their families to attend college. Fifty percent of the teens are Latino and 50 percent are doctor’s kids and kids of higher income brackets.

This innovative model involves youths mentored by professional adults to serve a growing need in our community and offers high school students an experience that could launch them into a career in health care. Students are exposed to doctors, nurses, chiropractors, physical therapists, dentists, pharmacists, health educators, counselors, and case managers.

The high school students are the first to serve the patient and are ultimately the one who presents the patient to the doctor and explains why the patient is at the clinic. The doctor then explains to the patient and student why they are making their diagnosis and what the patient needs to do. Everyone learns and the doctors say they like volunteering at our clinic because of the student-training component. Students are involved in every aspect of patient care as both assistants and observers. After each clinic session, student and adult volunteers participate in brief seminars on current medical-ethics topics of interest. The students are provided with unique opportunities to attend medical lectures, accompany the physician on hospital rounds in traditional hospital settings as well as nursing
homes, substance abuse centers and emergency rooms so they are exposed to as many elements of a medical career as possible.

Students also participate in monthly training sessions, have job shadowing opportunities, community outreach projects and field trips to places like UCLA Children’s Hospital and Ventura County Medical Center to learn about other career possibilities. The Clinic’s teen training model has been featured in a number of national publications including *Family Circle Magazine* and *Inspire Your World*.

Mireya Candelario and Alma Garcia are two Latino teens participating in the HEALTH Matters Teen Training Program. More than 80 percent of the people using the WFC clinic are Latinos, increasing the need for Spanish-speaking volunteers. Candelario says, "I know how it feels to not speak English. It's hard not knowing." At the clinic, the teens translate medical histories for the patients. “Doctors rely on the histories to figure out what is wrong with the patient,” said Dr. Arbi Ghazarian, a volunteer physician at WFC. "Communication is the key to deciphering what's going on," Ghazarian said. "Without translators, really, I can't do anything."

Garcia says working at WFC “makes me want to go into medicine. I want to be a surgeon.” The knowledge that she is helping people boosted Candelario's confidence about her career choice. "At first I thought I couldn't do it," Candelario said. "It's helped me a lot because this is what I want to do. I want to be a nurse."

Cindy Vincent, co-founder of the clinic, said she would like the program to offer scholarships for the teens to continue with medicine in college. The program has helped them know that they can have careers in medicine. "They know it's not pie in the sky, something so difficult and unattainable that they can't do it," Vincent said. "Now they do it every week. It really makes things real for the kids."

**Bringing Teen Agers Back from the Brink**

Low-income teens are at-risk for a variety of reasons. Their economic situation is certainly an important component that indirectly affects many other things but there are also cultural challenges teen’s faces as they learn to live in a new culture. Many have family and friends, who are threatened by their wish to improve themselves, not marry young, or have dreams of going to college. Latino teens face many paradoxes. For example, a teenage girl who has chosen to be sexual active has a mother who forbids her to use modern monthly feminine protection because she will lose her virginity.

Another teenage girl who is getting straight A’s in high school is ostracized by her single mother and four siblings (her mother makes $8/hour and her brother has damaged hearing because they couldn't afford antibiotics when he had an ear infections), because she hopes to go to college and not work at Taco Bell like her mother, and aunts.

Many low-income teens of East Ventura County want to make something of their lives, but need support and mentors to help them achieve their dreams and have hope for their future. Research from
The Search Institute in Minnesota shows that teens that have goals and hope that they can make something of their lives, are less likely to engage in unhealthy behaviors in their teen years.9 WFC is creating goals and dreams for the teenagers who volunteer at the clinic.

In order for low-income teens to be able to participate a stipend is included to encourage parents to support the youth’s activity and for parents to see the teen’s time is benefiting the family (the teen has some pocket money and they are able to help with family expenses,) WFC is continually challenged to keep teens in enriching experiences that give the teens new meaningful work experiences. In the past few years 100 percent go on to college after a WFC internship, most for careers in healthcare

The WFC Model
The model for HEALTH Matters Teen Training Program is so simple. Dr. Kamajian is hoping to be able to present it to other communities. The HEALTH Matters Teen Training Program is an excellent opportunity for students exploring careers in health sciences and who have a sincere desire to help the poor. High school freshman and sophomore students are especially encouraged to apply. It is the desire of the clinic to train students who will commit to long-term service, throughout their high school career. The WFC interviews students from high schools in the spring.

School counselors assist in this effort by selecting the students they feel are best qualified to represent the high school. Those students then attend a group interview session conducted by the WFC staff on a selected Saturday. There are no make-up sessions for the interview. The WFC staff selects the students to assist at the clinic. Selected students are trained and serve on a team to assist with patient care on a regularly assigned evening.

"Students must have initiative; they should not be mere imitators. They must learn to think and act for themselves and be free."
– Cesar Chavez

Why Medical Service Learning in High School?
Potential benefits to high school students:

- Takes students out of the classroom and into the community to provide students with “real-life” experiences that in turn supports and contributes to academic learning
- Gives students an opportunity to become active citizens, to be part of the political process and part of the problem solving solutions that impact the community
- Provides students with political, social and professional resources
- Broadens perspectives and enhances critical thinking skills
- Improves interpersonal and human relations skills
- Allows you to forge professional networks

In addition, this program is a natural feed for finding competent, good hearted and kind students for College of Osteopathic Medicine programs.
Alumni – Where Are They Now

Over 200 student clinic volunteers have passed through the WFC. Many alumni are in eight-year college/medical school programs and several have graduated. With the lessons, they have learned from WFC, they are all fully aware of their responsibility to others, right from the start. The following are a few alumni vignettes of their journey with WFC and where it has led them.10

Amanda Avinson

Where Now: Currently, a corporate attorney at Wilson, Sonsini, Goodrich & Rosati in Palo Alto, Ca. Received a B.A. in History from Stanford University and J.D. from the University of Southern California.

“I started volunteering when the WFC was founded (around 1994 I believe) when I was in middle school and have continued volunteering for the WFC in one capacity or another up until the present. I am currently the Corporate Secretary and outside pro bono legal counsel for the WFC.

I wanted to serve the community and learn more about the practice of medicine. My work at the clinic taught me the value and importance of community service (no matter the field). I am currently involved representing several nonprofits on a pro bono basis (including WFC) and volunteer for a local legal aid society.

I think WFC taught me the power of perseverance and vision. The clinic was very small when we started (in a broom closet). At the time, I never would have dreamed that it could expand to help so many different people. But the vision and motivation of many people (Dr. Kamajian included), most of who had full time day jobs of their own, allowed WFC to become the organization it is today. It is a true credit to all the individuals involved in WFC that this was done almost entirely by volunteers.

The WFC taught me that community service is both a duty of every citizen and a privilege. Many people hesitate to volunteer at nonprofit organizations because they are afraid of the time commitment or becoming overly involved in something that does not seem to have a direct benefit to their life. However, volunteering, particularly at a place like WFC, has been one of the more rewarding professional duties of my life and continues to be rewarding.”

Aegean Chan

Where Now: Attending M.D. program at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York

“I worked at the clinic from the end of my sophomore year in high school until I graduated, so just about 2.5 years. I had decided that I was interested in medicine from a very young age and actually, my first time at the clinic was when I was in the 8th grade. I had a very intense first experience, which included assisting Dr. Kamajian in washing out a large open ulcer on a patient. My mother decided I was too young then to start working regularly, but even at that time, I knew that medicine was my passion and I simply loved working in the clinic, exposing myself to the clinical setting, being around patients. I just wanted to learn and the clinic was the absolute best place to do that.

Yes, the clinic had a huge impact on my career. I am currently in my first year in medical school, at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York and I definitely attribute my experience
working at the clinic to keeping me so passionate about medicine. Having the chance to directly
interview patients, take vitals signs, and learn intimately about the diagnosis process solidified my
desire to enter into medicine. Dr. Kamajian's holistic approach to medical care was so inspiring to me
and demonstrated to me the truly patient-centered compassionate spirit of medicine. Being with him
and watching him diagnose the patient, while talking to him about every aspect of his life is an
experience that still stays with me, and which I recall every time I speak with a patient.

After medical school, I am very interested in pursuing a career in pediatrics, as well as being involved
in providing healthcare to those underserved in the community. This could possibly be in the form of
something like the WFC. I am also very interested in assisting in global health initiatives and projects.

It was such a unique opportunity and I still have not met anyone who has even heard of such a hands
on clinic, allowing high schoolers to take patient histories and complete vital signs. The skills that I
learned there at such an early age helped me through out my undergraduate clinical experiences, and I
am building on those skills here in medical school. To have that opportunity gave me the confidence
and competence to do well in my subsequent volunteer jobs. Also, Dr. Kamajian's way of speaking to
patients, caring for their entire well-being, from family stress to work, has affected the way I see
patients' health. It is not only their physical health, but mental and emotional. After every clinic
session, he took the time to speak to us high school students frankly about life issues, having some
kind of faith and the meaning of this work that we were doing. These lessons inspired me and still stay
with me to this day, providing meaning when medicine begins to feel tough and like a burden. My
admiration for Dr. Kamajian is still so great, and I only hope I have the same dedication to my patients
and for the community well being.”

Elizabeth Elman

Where Now: Currently in UC San Diego's Medical Scholars Program, which assures her a place in the
UCSD Medical School upon graduation.

“I wanted to help in my community, and I knew I wanted to become a physician, so WFC was the
perfect opportunity to make a difference while doing something that excited me. I volunteer at WFC
for three years – from 10th through 12th grade.

I am still in college, but I do plan to enter the field of medicine when I graduate, and my time at WFC
has made me very interested in the availability of health care on both a local and global scale.

I want to affect the international availability of health care, and while I am not exactly sure how I
want to do this, I am considering opening a free clinic like WFC and working abroad with Doctors
Without Borders or another similar organization.

WFC placed me directly inside of the world of health care. I got to see first hand the disastrous effects
of irregular health care, and at the same time, what a difference one person can make. My time at
WFC was educational and inspirational, and I am so thankful for the opportunity the clinic provided
me.”

Lary Hsu
Where Now: Currently, a resident in Orthopedic Surgery at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois and aspires to be in sports medicine.

“I was always interested in medicine, but I wanted to get a taste of what it was like to work in a clinic, that is where WFC really solidified my career path. I volunteered at WFC during my senior year in high school, but I continue to volunteer intermittently when I am home for break from medical school. I found it very rewarding to serve a population that otherwise would have no medical care. At WFC, I learned basic history taking skills and it gave me an early taste of patient interaction that has helped me throughout medical school.”

**Barbara Mazina**
Where Now: Currently a junior at Stanford University, majoring in Human Biology with a concentration in International Children's Health and Rights.

“I volunteered during high school, starting at the end of my freshman year and volunteering until the end of my senior year. My motivation to volunteer was mainly to gain exposure to the medical world and get hands-on practice in medicine, as well as of course to make a difference in the lives of patients who, without this clinic, would not have access to medical care.

Working at the clinic made me even surer of my decision to pursue medicine as a career; seeing the impact that such wonderful doctors as Dr. Kamajan and Dr. Ghazarian have on the patients they see was the biggest factor for me. These amazing doctors truly care about their patients, and I saw how much this mattered to the patients. It is truly an inspiring atmosphere.

After graduation, I plan to pursue a master's degree and take off a year or two, and then apply to medical school. I want to become a physician working with low-income populations in the US, as well as in the third world; I also want to work in community health development, and in advocacy of universal health care.

The WFC experience helped me most by providing insight into the realities of medical care, as well as the realities of the health of individuals in the low-income bracket. For many of the patients that came to the clinic, lacking health insurance and often legal status in the US, primary health care is not a reality, whether because it is not affordable or because of fears of legal persecution. Seeing what amazing impact clinics such as the WFC are able to make helped me see that becoming a doctor working in such communities is what I want to do.

The WFC and the wonderful staff there--the doctors, nurses, clinicians, administrators, everyone--truly changed my life, making it clear who I want to become and what I want to achieve in my life.”

**Sebastian Ohanian**
Where Now: 2005 graduate from UCLA with a degree in Molecular, Cell, and Developmental Biology. Currently enrolled at the University of Miami School Of Law, projected graduation 2010.
“I volunteered at WFC for about three years while I attended high school from 1999-2001. I had a great interest in the field of medicine. When I was very young, I wanted to be a physician. As I grew older (into high school), I no longer wanted to go to medical school, but I still wanted to work in the medical field. I thought working at the clinic would provide me with invaluable experience not only in the medical field but in different capacities as well. For instance, I learned the importance of compassion through helping the patients, and the importance of communicating clearly through patient interviews.

The clinic was very important in my career choice—I experienced firsthand the insufficiencies of medical care and tremendous workload on medical doctors. I saw how doctors, through the last twenty years, have taken large pay cuts yet work longer hours. Truly, I enjoyed volunteering. It was one of my highlights growing up, but the prospect of working so hard for so long for so little turned me off from the profession.

Currently, I attend law school. Even though this profession gets a good deal of jokes about hurting others, it is really about helping others. With both professions, we help the less knowledgeable and the less fortunate in different ways. The clinic taught me compassion and patience, which I will carry for the rest of my life.

Aside from the emotional maturity that came with working at the clinic as I describe above, I gained much practical experience as well. The clinic gave me a step up in my undergraduate studies (in science courses) because of the immense knowledge I acquired from taking patient histories, working with pharmaceuticals (with the assistance of a licensed individual), and presenting cases to Dr. Kamajian. Working at the clinic also provided a great starting point for students interested in attending medical school. Furthermore, I learned of the immense dedication of doctors to their field and the long hours they spend trying to help others.

The multipurpose nature of WFC makes it an ideal experience for everyone involved. First, the clinic volunteers can provide medical attention to the needy at a very low cost. Considering the staggering costs of emergency care, the clinic reduces health costs by using preventative medicine. Second, the clinic exposes student volunteers to the field of medicine and volunteering. Students learn a tremendous amount and do good by helping others. Finally, adults can share their knowledge to teach students and help their community at the same time by volunteering. These attributes of WFC create an ideal model of inexpensive medical care to the needy while providing a practical mode of teaching students. The success of this program has been incredible, and I hope that other communities will put this model to use.”

Nanci Zhang
Where Now: Currently at UCLA pursuing her undergraduate studies in Neuroscience and African American Studies. She volunteers in clinical settings as well as in a neuroscience lab, and plans on taking a bit of time off and then attending medical school.

“I began my sophomore year in high school, a commitment that continued well through high school. Now I am in my junior year of college, but whenever I am home in Thousand Oaks during breaks from school, I am at the clinic to lend a hand. It has made that much of an impact on me.”
I honestly, just like to volunteer. It makes me definitely feel healthier. My parents stressed the
importance of it to me from an early age, and I have been volunteering in soup kitchens since I was
quite young. WFC was an opportunity to help others on a long-term basis, and I jumped at it.

Truly, in my high school years I did not want to be a doctor. I have family in medicine and my mother
thought it would fit my personality more to study broadcast journalism. I came to the clinic not to see
what its like to be a doctor, but just to help. My strengths were/are not really in math and science, but
humanities and language, I personally think. I figured that I could not really get through to med school
anyway. After years of being with the clinic every week without fail, however, I found a voice in
being of help to others and a strong voice at that. After years of volunteering, I learned that a career in
medicine is not a pie-in-the-sky aspiration, and that truly medicine is not about “A” grades in physics
or biochem, rather it is about preserving the human form with utmost empathy. And I know I can do
that, even if I cannot do derivatives all that well.

After medical school, I would like to spend some time practicing medicine internationally, and
working with patients about their bodies. I fervently believe that lack of health education is a large root of
health problems. I also think that medicine and healthcare is very much about traversing cultural
barriers, so proficiency in another language or two would be incredibly helpful. After being abroad, I
would like to practice family medicine. Lately I have also been considering Obstetrics/Gynecology.
Women's health and sexual health has always been an important topic to me, especially since for
many people it is challenging to speak on such issues.

WFC has really allowed me to learn in all capacities. I am able to interact with all ages, and be a
friend, sister, daughter, and confidante to colleagues and patients. I am an only child, and now I have
an infinitely large family. I have learned about manifestations of allergies and to address others
concerns as if they were my own. The experiences have helped me to shape my own self in all spheres
of my life.”

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