

Free Clinics Care for the Uninsured

By Myra Resnick

"I felt so frustrated when friends asked me, 'How can I get health care?' They're not necessarily poor, but they have barriers to getting insurance," says medical student, **Joanne Sung**. She is now able to refer her friends and others to the New York City Free Clinic for the uninsured, one of two such clinics operated by the Institute for Urban Family Health in partnership with students from two of New York's premiere medical schools.

While she was a New York University medical student, **Susan Olender, MD**, was a member of the team that put in three years of dedicated work to convince New York University to support a student-run free clinic. "We believed that health care is a right, not a privilege," she says, speaking for the team. "We wanted to create a cultural and language sensitive, patient-centered environment that would benefit the community and offer students an opportunity to commit to community service. That's what kept us going for three years."

The New York City Free Clinic opened in March of this year at the Institute's Sidney Hillman Family Practice in Manhattan. The NYU students modeled their clinic after the Walton Free Clinic, which opened in the Bronx in 1999. The Walton Free Clinic was developed through the initiative of medical students at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine's ECHO (Einstein Community Health Outreach) program.

At both sites, medical students work to obtain funding, connect with the uninsured, and recruit the physicians and nurse practitioners who volunteer to supervise and precept at the clinics.

"Precepting at the free clinics is wonderful," says **Amarilys Cortijo, MD**, who is Medical Director at both clinics. "The students are eager and excited about the opportunity to go beyond book knowledge. They gain experience in being a good listener and they raise their consciousness about how social factors influence health."

"The statistics on uninsured people are astoundingly high," says Ms. Sung. "Some people come in with extreme conditions they were neglecting because they could not afford care. One patient had hypothyroidism and a noticeable goiter...which is usually controlled by medication before it gets to an advanced stage. I didn't know I would get this involved, but I found that I got a lot of satisfaction from being part of the clinic." She is now Project Coordinator.

The free clinics are open on Saturday mornings. Students are under the direct supervision of a senior physician at all times. Patients are offered free medical exams, medications, diagnostic imaging and laboratory services, and health promotion workshops. The students, along with Institute social workers, offer aid in applying for public health insurance and provide referrals for job training, counseling, and other social services.

Both clinics offer free preventive care to people for whom it would otherwise be a luxury beyond their reach. "In Manhattan," says Ms. Sung, "We're seeing many college graduates. They're free-lancers whose income has gone down or people who lost their jobs and their insurance with the poor economy. We're also targeting the uninsured through outreach to community-based organizations in lower Manhattan." In the Bronx, the Walton Free Clinic sees many people who have never had medical insurance — they are the long-term unemployed or they work for small businesses. Some are immigrants who had achieved a professional status in their country of origin but who now must take any job they find.

"The experience of working with this group of people is of tremendous value to our students," says Dr. Cortijo, "The work they do here will make them better doctors in the future."

Dr. Susan Olender, who is now an intern at New York Hospital - Columbia Presbyterian Medical Center, agrees. "We were exposed to wonderful mentors who encouraged us to look at the whole person and the psychosocial aspects of medical care. When I had the experience of dealing with government agencies to get services for patients, I greatly increased my understanding of our health care systems, and of the difficulties people face in getting good care. I'm committed to working in underserved communities in the future."

Dr. Neil Calman, President and CEO of the Institute for Urban Family Health, recognized years ago the need to offer free health care to the uninsured. "Some people in our community find that even the most minimal charges are enough to keep them from getting needed care." He is quick to add, "the free clinics are critical now, but I will be happier when our country finally decides to provide health insurance for all peoples so that the clinics are no longer needed." ■