

Stanford's free clinics provide services to patients who might otherwise receive none, while at the same time creating knowledge about the diverse needs of the community.

—Philip Pizzo, MD, *Dean of the School of Medicine*

The real purpose of a medical education is to care for patients. That's why Stanford gives students two remarkable opportunities to gain hands-on experience beginning in their preclinical—and even undergraduate—years. By volunteering at Arbor Free Clinic or Pacific Free Clinic, students not only acquire basic clinical skills, they also learn how to work closely with diverse populations and even find out what it takes to run a community health service center.

The clinics, founded by Stanford students interested in expanding health care to underserved communities, provide much-needed services at no cost to recent immigrants, low-income earners, uninsured citizens, the homeless, and others. Most of the patients speak only Spanish or languages from the Asian Pacific. Physicians in training work under the supervision of Stanford faculty volunteers on the nitty-gritty of diagnosing and determining treatment—or making referrals to other health care facilities—for patients with illnesses ranging from the mild to the severe, the acute to the chronic. They also help provide preventative diagnostic tests, physical exams, and sexual health services, among others.

Volunteer physicians and students at Arbor, which has been in operation for the past 15 years in Menlo Park, see

patients on a walk-in basis on Sundays; those at Pacific, which got its start two years ago in East San Jose, work with patients on Saturdays. Preclinical medical students learn how to take medical histories, present to attending physicians, and practice skills such as taking vital signs and performing examinations for the approximately 25 patients who pass through the doors at each facility every weekend. Clinical medical students develop further skills such as conducting physical exams, drawing blood, and testing for tuberculosis. At Arbor, undergraduates staff the front desks and shadow medical students and physicians, while at Pacific they do everything but draw blood and conduct physical exams. Students with bilingual skills serve as both interpreters and patient advocates.

Real Patients, Real Problems

This academic year both clinics for the first time will run joint training sessions for all entering first-year medical students on taking patient histories, using interpreters, taking vital signs, and drawing blood. “We are extending the instruction so all students can benefit, whether they volunteer or not,” says Chris Adams, a third-year medical student who helps manage preclinical staffing and training at Arbor Free.

“It's important that students get their feet wet in clinical skills as early as possible,” adds Rex Chiu, MD, clinical

assistant professor of medicine and medical director of Pacific Free Clinic. “It simply makes them better prepared physicians down the line.”

Students may also serve as steering committee members or clinic managers, which allows them to perform all the day-to-day work of staffing and stocking the clinics, handling patient advocacy and community outreach, networking with other health facilities, communicating with community decision makers, and fundraising to help keep the clinics viable.

“These are important aspects of being a health care practitioner that you simply don’t learn in the classroom,” says Gigi Liu, a third-year medical student and one of the managers at Pacific. “Most medical students don’t realize that running or even working in a hospital or a clinic involves dealing with administrators, social workers, and lawyers, for example, or that it requires making difficult decisions about how to properly allocate limited resources. Serving in the clinic extends my view of medicine while giving me incredible hands-on experience in primary care.”

Cultural Exposure

Student volunteers develop a host of other skills that make them better physicians, as well, such the ability to communicate effectively with patients, work with translators, and take into account socioeconomic and cultural issues that affect certain patient populations. Faculty volunteers model for students how to conduct simple interactions, such as knowing how much personal space or eye contact to give patients, or how to incorporate traditional diets or the role of extended families into consultations.

“It’s also important that students learn to respect cultural norms and beliefs,” says Lars Osterberg, MD, clinical assistant professor of medicine and medical director of Arbor Free. “For example, a number of our Tongan patients consult traditional healers on health issues, and we make every effort to work in harmony with that.”

The two clinics represent a major outreach effort in community medicine on the part of the medical school. Numerous professors, including deans, have volunteered their time as attending physicians. The clinics fill an important niche in the community by providing general, acute, and preventive care to patients: Arbor Free, which handles a more transient population,

Foundation Promotes Community Services

The Pacific Free Clinic benefits from support from The Health Trust, a foundation that promotes the work of community-based organizations and not-for-profit hospitals. The Trust provided the initial \$120,000 three-year grant to launch the clinic and worked closely with its student founders to find the best location for its services.

“We offer support to programs that provide innovative ways for individuals to access care,” says Linda Appleton, program officer at The Health Trust. “These clinics are unique in that they also maximize the skills of students and expose them to community health, an area of medicine they might not otherwise consider. We are pleased with this clinic model.”



In fact, she adds, two students who helped found the Pacific Free Clinic served as interns at the Trust, awarding grants to other enterprises in community health outreach.

The Health Trust was established to provide support to projects for the underserved members of Santa Clara County, with a focus on prevention and wellness services, health education, and primary care. The Trust has awarded more than \$19 million since 1998 and has partnered with Arbor Free Clinic since 1999.

services about 700 patients each year, while Pacific Free serves 450 patients.

The clinics correlate with the U.S. Department of Health’s Healthy People 2010 initiative, which calls on practitioners to provide more universal access to care and improve their cultural competency in the next five years. “Our clinics demonstrate that Stanford is making strides in those directions,” says Dr. Osterberg. ❧