

2009

Care for the Uninsured: A Year of Review for La Casita de la Salud

Jennifer M. Thomas
New York Medical College

Gordon M. Burke
New York Medical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://touro scholar.touro.edu/quill_and_scope



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Medicine and Health Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Thomas, J. M., & Burke, G. M. (2009). Care for the Uninsured: A Year of Review for La Casita de la Salud. *Quill & Scope*, 2 (1). Retrieved from

This Perspective is brought to you for free and open access by Touro Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Quill & Scope by an authorized editor of Touro Scholar. For more information, please contact Timothy J Valente timothy.valente@touro.edu.



Care for the Uninsured: A Year of Review for La Casita de la Salud

Jennifer M. Thomas and Gordon M. Burke

Following his appointment, J.G. sat patiently across the clinic's waiting room while we began to shut down La Casita de la Salud's operations. We had seen J.G. before - he was a 17-year old uninsured immigrant from Puerto Rico who frequently visited La Casita. Having been diagnosed with Juvenile Huntington's Disease (juvenile HD) six years ago, his disease had become dramatically worse over the last three years. Juvenile HD is a devastating disease where the patient suffers from progressive loss of motor function, in addition to severe decline in mental abilities and behavior. Nearby, his uncle gently approached us at the front desk with hand extended and we took a moment to speak with him. His uncle had heard about La Casita from a co-worker at his construction company and searched us out for help with his nephew. J.G. was not able to receive medical care because of his lack of insurance. Although the available treatment provides minimal benefit in prognosis, La Casita was able to grant counseling and answer questions regarding his condition to both him and his family. As we paused for a moment to speak with J.G.'s uncle, the only words he could say over again were those of thanks.

This is not an unusual scenario for the students of La Casita de la Salud, New York Medical College's student-run clinic. Our clinic is fortunate that it provides real-world experiences for our students. It not only provides health care to the underserved, but it also shows students the impact that they may have in the life of their patients. Students can learn from an early point in their careers on how to handle sensitive situations, such as in the case with J.G. In return, our patients are receiving care that they would otherwise not obtain and are immensely appreciative. Students learn that their roles as health care physicians extend past the examination room and into the way of life of their patients. By linking our textbook learning with our emotions, students understand the impact they have and receive a taste of what is to come in their careers.

In the past year, La Casita has continued to grow. The clinic is dedicated to serving the uninsured populations of East Harlem and of neighboring boroughs surrounding Manhattan. The clinic has operated at 413 East 120th Street for the last four years. Thanks to the volunteer physicians, medical students, trained medical staff and paid interpreters, La Casita has progressed from its small, hopeful beginnings to a productive and consistent clinic in the East Harlem community. La Casita's development has blossomed over the past year.

In its formal operation, Clinical Care Teams are assigned per clinic date. We are proud to say that La Casita de la Salud now operates with eight established Clinical Care Teams, each consisting of eight to ten medical students. In addition to our teams, we have more than ten trained clinic supervisors, a lengthy alternative volunteer list and a large executive board. It is fair to say that this past year, La Casita was one of the largest student-run organizations at New York Medical College. The Executive Board also made larger attempts this year to incorporate both physical therapy students and public health students, in the hopes that we may all share medical experiences and educate amongst our peers. Our prediction is that the clinic will continue to grow and succeed as more students become involved.

We are also pleased to announce that we have also increased the number of our volunteer physicians. For the past two years, Dr. Pranav Mehta and Dr Barbara Koeppel have given their

time and mentorship to the students of New York Medical College. Without their commitment, La Casita would not have become the clinic it is today. This year, our physician coordinators were able to increase our volunteer physician number – La Casita now is under operation with more than ten physicians, in addition to our aforementioned preceptors. Because of our increased number of physicians, La Casita has been able to add additional clinic dates to our calendar, in hopes that our clinic will begin to operate on a weekly basis.

With the surge of student involvement, the increase in volunteer physicians, and the consistency of clinic dates, La Casita de la Salud is accommodating an influx of patients. This past year we are delighted to report that our students care for (on average) seven patients per clinic session. The number of patients that La Casita now sees is comparable to that of other New York City based student run clinics such as Columbia Medical Schools CoSMO (Columbia Student Medical Outreach) and Mt Sinai's EHHOP (East Harlem Health Outreach Partnership). This is a dramatic increase that has occurred over the past ten months.

Despite La Casita's accomplishments, there is still need for improvement. With the numbers of uninsured in the New York metropolitan area increasing, the shortage of adequate health care is mounting. Neighboring medical schools and their respective clinics, along with La Casita, are attempting to do their parts in improving the needs of the East Harlem population. The fact still remains that qualified physicians are desperately in need. In La Casita's future years, the newly elected directors need to be dedicated in recruiting volunteer physicians to lead our clinic teams. Without their guidance, the clinic will not be able to sustain the influx of new patients and as a result, more of the New York City population will be without care.

La Casita de la Salud also must begin to plan for expansion of the clinic. Although the current location of La Casita is prime for the population it hopes to serve, the physical space of the clinic is limited. As more student volunteers devote their time and as more new patients seek our services, the clinic will need to expand. The confines that our clinic currently operates within will not be able to sustain the strains of future operations. We hope that with committed fundraising efforts and devoted leadership, the future student leaders will be able to seek more resources and finances for the inevitable clinic growth.

There are a number of ways that La Casita de la Salud can improve, but we believe that the recruitment of energetic physicians and the search for a large venue are the immediate concerns. As for now, it is time for new leadership to take the reins on our growing clinic and to bring in their own new vigor into fostering more advancement. As we are grateful for the time we have had, we only hope that La Casita de la Salud can become better than how we left it.