American Healthcare: Does the System Allow Healthcare Providers Enough Time to Care for Their Patients?

Countless healthcare providers enter their pre-professional educations bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, eager to start learning how they can best help others in their communities – through medicine. They experience clinical rotations, written exams, and other arduous competency tests to gain the knowledge and ability to properly care for others. Something not taught to these future providers, however, are the many constraints placed on them, preventing optimal care for their patients – for example, the details of insurance policies and brief appointment times as a necessity for seeing as many patients as possible to maximize (arguably meager) reimbursement. These are some of the many barriers set up by our healthcare system that work against providers trying to give their patients the best possible treatment options. This causes problems in clinics nationwide, and finding a provider who will not only treat but has the time to listen to all of one’s symptoms and thoroughly explain treatment options and treatment plans is nearly impossible. However, this is not the case at Neighborhood Healthcare Clinics (NHC) in Escondido, CA, where providers continue the effort to put the “care” back in “healthcare”.

On a given day at NHC, one provider may see as many as 22 patients in the span of seven hours – about one patient every 20 minutes (including the extensive charting that needs to be completed for each patient). However, this doesn’t seem to be an issue for NHC providers and patients: providers come to work ready to move carefully yet efficiently, and patients feel genuine compassion from their providers. After leaving his appointment the other day, one patient told me: “I have been seeing my provider here for five years. I think
she really cares about me and gives me the best care she possibly can, unlike other providers I have seen in the past. I really think this is a testament to NHC because all of their providers and specialists, or at least the ones I’ve interacted with, seem to really want to make me better, and I like that about this place."

I too have seen this genuine compassion and excellent care firsthand while shadowing a primary care healthcare provider at NHC. I obtained this internship through a recommendation by a nurse practitioner who has worked with the organization since 2000, and who is a friend of my parents. In September of 2014, she mentioned to me that she would love to have me shadow her; she gave me contact information for her clinic and others, should I choose to shadow elsewhere. Networking with her and speaking with providers at other clinics really highlighted the importance of networking for me. Had I not mentioned looking for an internship, I would not have received the support and connections that I obtained through her. The internship at NHC really caught my attention because of the idea of helping an underserved community: many of the patients seen at NHC are underprivileged, living on food stamps and social security or disability, some are homeless, many do not speak English, and even more don’t have health insurance at all. As someone who desires to practice medicine within an underserved community, I think this internship will allow me to learn more about how to best care for this specific patient demographic.

Before I obtained the internship, however, I had to go through an interview and orientation process. I was incredibly nervous beforehand, hoping the interviewer would be nice, hoping my palms weren’t too sweaty, and hoping I would come out victorious. I remember the Director of Volunteer and Internship Services asking me, “So why do you
want to intern here specifically? Why don’t you stay in Massachusetts? What do we even have to offer you? You’re not even a Nurse Practitioner student.” I answered her question with strength in my voice, though I was highly unprepared for this question and wasn’t quite sure what to say. I told her how I was highly interested in serving a clinic that has such a great reputation in Escondido and wanted to serve the underprivileged community in a way I’m not entirely sure I would be able to in Massachusetts. I explained my passion for NHC’s mission statement, and how I share the desire to help every member of a community, regardless of privilege. She stoically shook my hand, told me that she was more than satisfied with my answer, and told me to wait outside for orientation. I felt so relieved afterwards and couldn’t wait to tell my friends and family about my new opportunity at NHC.

Once I started shadowing at NHC, I fell in love with the organization. I identify so strongly with the mission and vision of the organization because I too want to help the less fortunate members of my community. I have always been aware of my privileged background and I am adamant about leveraging that to help others who aren’t so fortunate. Eventually I want to be a physician for underprivileged communities, and I think NHC is a perfect place for me to see how medicine in an underserved community is put into practice as well as to learn more about many of the combined health and social problems these people face. Additionally, I am eager to observe how the mission statement is put into practice at NHC and how NHC’s providers’ collaboration corresponds to excellent patient care.

The healthcare providers are incredibly caring and helpful and are always putting the patients first, even when that means losing time for lunch or staying late at the clinic to
finish sending prescriptions or referrals to specialists. Additionally, the primary care providers are incredibly knowledgeable about individual insurance companies and know how to get what patients need while still complying with insurance companies’ labyrinthine reimbursement rules. The details of various insurances, especially Medi-Cal, is a topic that greatly interests me as I prefer to “read the rules before I play the game” and want to one day be the best provider I can through learning the ins and outs of all aspects of the healthcare system. I can’t wait to learn more about it as I continue with my internship at NHC.

Three specific expectations I have for this internship are to:

1) Learn how to effectively treat a patient in a low-cost manner (sixty percent of patients at NHC are either on Medicaid or are uninsured, see page 16),

2) Learn how to effectively provide for a patient with strong language barriers, and

3) Learn how healthcare providers work together to provide the best patient care possible.

I believe HSSP majors are the missing links between the citizens of our communities and the confusing and daunting world of healthcare. We help our constituents understand and get past the chaos and stress of healthcare and help provide them with the best available healthcare. When our healthcare system fails to help our patients, we work to make the necessary changes. Given that this philosophy is the bedrock of NHC’s approach, I think my time here will allow me to become a stronger and more skilled HSSP major.