Neighborhood Healthcare: An Experience for the Books

It's my last day at Neighborhood Healthcare. Part of my saying goodbye involves warm hugs and many well wishes from the clinicians, site manager, and the medical assistants. I thank them for all they have taught me. As I take one last walk through the employee side door, I look over my shoulder and notice a patient leaving the clinic, enthused about a new, low-cost treatment option for her chronic pain. In this last look around, I feel sheer pride in the work this incredible organization does on a daily basis. In just a few months, so much has happened.

A good part of those happenings was fueled by my expectations for this internship, which were: to learn how to treat a patient in a medically effective and cost effective manner, to learn to provide strong medical care through communication with a patient with a strong language barrier, and to learn how healthcare providers work together to provide excellent patient care. My expectations were well met, as I learned much more about each of these topics, and more, and believe that what I have learned in this internship will allow me to be a stronger healthcare provider (eventually).

Concerning my first expectation, to learn to effectively treat a patient while keeping it low cost, was one of the most fascinating aspects of medicine I have ever learned. NHC has a steadfast commitment to providing the best care to their patients, with an emphasis on working through the finances to keep the treatment as low-cost to the patients as possible. In each case and for each treatment, the nurse practitioners, medical assistants, and case managers must work together to determine the most effective treatment for patients given their insurance, health conditions, and an extensive risk assessment for particular treatments. Sometimes this teamwork takes hours, days, and sometimes weeks,
to ensure the patient can afford the medication (s)he most needs to live, work, and be a functioning member of society. I have never seen as much teamwork and commitment to patients, especially to those with financial difficulties, as I have at NHC.

My second expectation, of learning to effectively provide care for a patient with strong language barriers, was also reasonably met. I learned much more Spanish as it applies to the medical field as well as proper etiquette when seeing patients of various cultures and religions. For example, we saw some patients who are Buddhist monks for whom treatment and physical examination were different than for the “average” patient. The monks could not remove any clothing for physical examination unless absolutely necessary and they have unique communication customs depending on the sex of the provider.

My final expectation, of learning how healthcare providers work together to provide excellent patient care, was also well met. In addition to the aforementioned teamwork to keep treatments at low cost to the patients, the healthcare providers at NHC are all genuinely invested in the wellbeing and true improvement of each other’s patients. For example, a patient well known around the clinic once came in with an infected wound from dropping a large object on her leg. The wound looked particularly grisly, and the patient was clearly in distress, unable to walk long distances due to the pain. One healthcare provider saw the patient and called in other providers to look at the wound and together they worked on the perfect treatment for this patient so she could heal and her leg wouldn’t have to be amputated. In a follow-up appointment, all of the healthcare providers entered the exam room in which the patient was waiting to assess the progress of treatment and decide on a further course of action as necessary together. This strong team
dynamic has resulted in excellent patient care, incredible patient outcomes, and, not surprisingly, a healthy work environment. I have learned so much from my time at NHC, more than I have at any organization in my undergraduate career, and have thoroughly enjoyed my time there.

I believe my expectations were realistic and realized because I was encouraged to take an active role at NHC. By this I mean I was allowed to participate in physical examinations of the patients with the nurse practitioner, ask questions of the nurse practitioner whenever they arose, and interact with patients both in and out of the exam room. I credit meeting my expectations to taking an active role in my internship through and picking up as much information as I possibly could at NHC. I also had an incredibly supportive, eager, and educational supervisor who was able and pleased to answer my questions and teach me physical exam and patient interaction techniques.

Other specific lessons I have learned at this internship can be applied to other settings as well. For example, in learning about effective patient-provider relationships, I gleaned how to gain a patient’s trust as a provider, and how to work effectively as a team, as opposed to working one-sidedly as a healthcare provider independent of the patient. This applies most directly to my work as an EMT: being able to obtain a proper medical history and understanding of the emergency through gaining a patient’s trust in the ten minute interaction I have with that patient would give me a great advantage in treating that patient in the most effective manner possible. However, gaining trust is important in many situations that aren’t medical. For example, I work at a sleep away summer camp, and gaining the trust of not only my campers but also my coworkers and superiors would allow for the best experience for everyone by not only creating a more hospitable work
environment, but also a more comfortable environment for children who are hundreds of miles from home for weeks. Additionally, I intend on using what I have learned at NHC in my internship with the Gift of Life in registering college students for the bone marrow registry. I have learned how to sensitively explain medical procedures while still understanding patients’ concerns at NHC and I think this is an incredibly powerful tool in working with the Gift of Life as well. I think this skill will also be valuable in my work as an EMT, particularly when explaining pros and cons of various transport and treatment options to a patient, while also being an empathetic and compassionate healthcare provider.

While I loved the summer I spent at NHC, given more time there, I would have appreciated learning more about case management and what specifically goes into working with insurance companies to accomplish referrals and requests for patients efficiently and effectively. For example, a paraplegic who has been a patient at NHC for the past ten years or so needed a new wheelchair, which was rejected by her insurance company. The nurse practitioner needed to order more tests and imaging to be done before she could submit a request again for a new wheelchair, which the insurance company later rejected. Soon after, case management at NHC called the insurance company with the patient’s healthcare provider, and only after about an hour of heated discussion, did the request get approved. I would have liked to learn more about insurance companies and why they rejected this request and what could be done to hasten this seemingly unnecessarily circuitous process. Additionally, I would have also liked to learn about working as a federally funded clinic, and how this differs from a private practice.
Knowing what I’d like to know is one helpful way to move forward in my academic and professional endeavors. This internship has shown me the significance of providing healthcare for the people who need it most in our society. One day I hope to work as a physician in a clinic for the underserved surrounding community, similar to NHC, as I have a strong desire to give back to my community. I don’t know if I would have even considered working in a federally funded clinic as a career option until I had the privilege of working at NHC. I have seen firsthand the necessity for these providers and clinics, and I want to minimize the need for this as much as possible and help those around me in any way possible.

Because of this internship’s impact on me, I would highly recommend other HSSP students seek out similar experiences. I know my experience was particularly eye-opening, inspiring, and thought-provoking. I recommend this type of internship to anyone interested in the field of medicine, especially HSSP majors. I have greatly appreciated my time at NHC, and I hope to one day return to the clinic as a healthcare provider.

For other HSSP majors or undergraduate students interested in this sort of internship, I recommend keeping an open mind. Every day at the clinic brings new experiences, interactions, challenges, and successes, and the only way to grow from these experiences is to have an open mind walking into the clinic every day. I started this internship with an open mind, and I’m glad I did because it allowed me to learn as much from the experience as I possibly could and devise creative solutions to intricate problems. I also suggest asking as many questions as possible because the providers and medical assistants (at least at NHC) love helping people interested in the organization and broader
field. They are inspiring and knowledgeable teachers who care so much about their profession and want to involve others as much as possible.

Even though I have left the Neighborhood, I will always carry with me the memories, compassion, and creativity I gained from my coworkers, patients, and the healthcare providers. I am incredibly grateful for this experience, and can’t wait for the day I return to Neighborhood Healthcare Clinics to serve as a healthcare provider, and even have an intern of my own.