



## **The Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic Puts Down Roots**

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By Matt Karp, MSII

**The student-run clinic that formerly used a cramped RV to treat patients now has a home in Sacramento's Oak Park.**

*Matt Karp is one of seven co-directors of the Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic, a UC Davis student-run free clinic treating IV drug users and sex workers.*

THE LAST TIME AN ARTICLE WRITTEN by a Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic co-director appeared in these pages, back in 2004, our clinic still had wheels. That's not to say that the wheels have fallen off the bus (although from some of the stories told, that wouldn't be a surprise), but that the co-directors before us saw the wisdom of spending our ever-rising RV maintenance fees more directly on patient care.

We thus put down roots in Oak Park, sharing a building with the Harm Reduction Services (HRS) needle exchange program detailed in Dr. Glennah Trochet's report in the July/August 2008 issue. While we still find ourselves apologetically explaining our dearth of mobility at fundraising events, the added stability has greatly assisted our patients in (a) being able to find us every weekend and (b) not having to undergo a physical exam in the cramped confines of a mid-size recreational vehicle.

Being next door to a needle exchange has allowed us to expand our outreach while staying in one place, an added benefit of the now-legal exchange programs in the City of Sacramento. Working with HRS, we get referrals from patients who use the needle exchange throughout the week.

Additionally, because of HRS's excellent reputation with the intravenous drug user community, we get a leg-up on gaining the trust of a population that is skeptical of the white coat and stethoscope crowd.

As co-director Sally Graglia writes, "We want to build relationships of trust, communication, and understanding with the hope that in the future we will be advocates for our patients - that when they ask for resources to change their lives, when their personal lives will enable them to change their lifestyle - they will have us to help them."

In the past year, our



*The seven co-directors of the Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic, all second year*

clinic has grown in more ways than one. Our physical space has grown exponentially, since all we had to do was add one exam room to the two existing.

*medical students at UC Davis: From the left, Mikel Matto, Melissa Loja, Sally Graglia, Rasna Sandhu, Jordan Lilienstein, Dan Stein and Matt Karp.*

Combine that with the addition of adequate air conditioning and last year's addition of solid walls and, from our perspective, we're practicing limited resource medicine while living the life of Riley. We've begun to offer the hepatitis A/B vaccine to our patients free of charge, and we've already seen nearly a hundred new patients this year, moving the total number of individual patients in the 10 year history of the clinic past the thousand mark.



*The Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic is now located at this site.*

When I tell family members or friends that I work in a clinic that targets drug users and prostitutes, it invites a certain quizzical look. More forward people just blurt out, "But why?"

We all have our reasons of course, but first: it's not about us. I mean that seriously. As medical students, we spend such long afternoons in simulated interactions with actors playing patients, groping and stumbling playing doctor (talking about how we're feeling, how we're reacting to the patient, how we're projecting ourselves), that it is very easy to forget that it is not about us. It is, of course, about the patient.

This is no more at the forefront of the mind than when a medical student confronts one of the hardest of physician duties: being the bearer of

bad news. In our clinic, this often takes the form of informing patients that they have tested positive for hepatitis C.

As medical students, we often get caught up in our own "act": to convey the news accurately, to explain complex odds and treatment options to an emotionally distraught patient, to try to explain how bad, or not bad, the case may be. It can be overwhelming, it can be a burden; but it is, of course, nothing compared to the burden the patient carries. All this is to say that, while we certainly have our individual reasons for working at Joan Viteri Clinic, the reason is the same as why we got into medicine in the first place. Our patients are just like any other patients: they need us.

As another co-director, Melissa Loja, writes, "I want to be the kind of doctor who can give care without judgment, to a population that is devastatingly underserved with few advocates." As co-directors, we oscillate between idealistic optimism and the realistic difficulties of the population we treat. Luckily, medical students are never short of the former.

Co-director Dan Stein loves "knowing that I'm delivering healthcare to someone whose only other option is the emergency room, where they can often be treated as fringe patients with fringe needs, and perceived as people whose worth is diminutive."

Harm reduction is the keystone of this approach. Thus, co-director Jordan Lilienstein writes that "our role in harm reduction is to keep our patients alive and healthy long enough for them to find their way out of their addictions. Even if they fail, it makes them no less human, and no less deserving of the best care we can provide to them."

Abscesses are the primary reason many of our patients come in, only to disappear until the next infection. During that time, we try to treat them for their immediate problem as well counsel them on the risks of sharing needles and of not cleaning injection sites.

Abstinence is always the goal, but never to the point that it is a barrier to care. This is especially important considering that our patients, just like any others, get all sorts of diseases completely unrelated to IV drug use. Thus, one of the advantages of optimism: being able to see past the drugs to treat our patients.

This article was written in a large part to provide an accounting of our clinic and its philosophy to the greater Sacramento and Sierra medical community. As co-director Mikel Matto puts it, "I get to provide healthcare to a group of people that are often forced to go without. And in doing so, I learn how to represent this group's needs and challenges to other physicians and those in the community with less exposure."

We are constantly trying to educate both ourselves and the greater medical community on approaches and needs specific to this unique population. However, many of the physicians' goals are not so different with these patients than any others: patient compliance, behavior modification, risk reduction.

Come February, we will hand the reins of the clinic over to a new class of co-directors. They will no doubt make their own improvements; more importantly, they will gain real experience with patients who, in so many ways, present many of the same challenges that we all face in the practice of medicine.

The patients and medical students at the Joan Viteri Memorial Clinic would appreciate your help as physician volunteers; because we are an official student-run clinic, malpractice is covered through UC Davis. Please see our website at <http://cim.ucdavis.edu/clinics/joan/index.html> for more information.

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