Students Join Forces to Bring Health Care to the Uninsured

By Tyler Smith

People without insurance often flock to emergency departments and hospitals as a last resort for their health care. A new clinic that opened this month in Aurora is looking to turn the tide by bringing care for the uninsured to the community.

The DAWN Clinic, which received funding from the Health Sciences schools and support from the nonprofit Primary Care Progress, is open on Tuesday evenings to walk-in adult patients who need medical and behavioral health services. Physical therapy is available Wednesday evenings by appointment.

University of Colorado Hospital provides discounted and donated laboratory and imaging services, said Geremi Boom, a third-year Skaggs School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences student who set up contracts between the clinic and the hospital.

Arms linked. Student volunteers and preceptors staff the clinic. They provide team-based care that combines services from aspiring physicians, pharmacists, nurses, physical therapists, mental health professionals, and dentists. The clinic is built around a well-defined organization with four divisions, each of them heading multiple work groups.

The DAWN (Dedicated to Aurora’s Wellness and Needs) Clinic is a free health center run by students of the University of Colorado’s Health Sciences schools. It’s part of the Dayton Street Opportunity Center, which on March 10 opened its doors to patients in remodeled storefront offices just off Colfax Avenue in downtown Aurora.

The center, designed as a one-stop community resource for education, job training, counseling, and health care, is a joint effort between the Fields Foundation, the Fields Wolfe Memorial Fund, the Mosaic Church of Aurora, and other partners. It’s part of a decade-long violence-prevention and community-strengthening effort by Rhonda Fields, a Colorado state representative from Aurora, whose son, Javad Marshall-Fields, was fatally shot on Dayton Street in 2005. Her son’s fiancée, Vivian Wolfe, was also slain in the shooting. Marshall-Fields was killed shortly before he was to testify in a murder trial.

Joseph Johnson, MD, a fourth-year resident in Internal Medicine, serves as the clinic’s medical director and is a board member of the Fields Wolfe Memorial Fund.
“We’re trying to integrate holistic care to avoid voice mails and phone calls to patients,” said David Choi, a third-year pharmacy student at CU. Choi said too often, health care is fragmented, with providers working in silos with little or no awareness of the care they’ve provided to the same patient. The team-based approach aims to provide holistic care that shuns phone calls between the various professions in favor of direct communication.

“Patients assume the provider in the next silo will know what the last one did,” Choi said. “With the DAWN Clinic, we’re trying to build one large silo around everybody.”

The Affordable Care Act and Colorado’s Medicaid expansion have helped to increase the numbers of newly insured people in the state, but the health care gap is still wide in Aurora, where more than 20 percent of the residents were still uninsured in 2013. A Community Need Index developed by Truven Health Analytics to measure socioeconomic factors linked to disparities in health care, ranked the neighborhoods around the Anschutz Medical Campus – including the one where the Opportunity Center is located – as “highest need,” said Katie Derington, another third-year CU pharmacy student.

Yet the students’ research in planning the clinic showed that too often, community members saw the campus “as a place that is not for us,” Choi said. He and his colleagues agreed that wasn’t acceptable.

“We all feel we came to this school to make a difference,” Choi said. “We all said, ‘Let’s help.’”

It’s a view echoed by second-year pharmacy student Claudia Corona, an immigrant from Mexico who attended Aurora Public Schools. Corona serves as a community liaison for the DAWN Clinic. Speaking to the standing-room-only crowd at the Opportunity Center ribbon-cutting on March 8, Corona expressed her belief that all citizens are entitled to health insurance.

“I’m proud to be part of a student body that is interested in preserving the health of our neighbors,” Corona said.

Complex care. The clinic saw just three patients on its first night (see accompanying story, this issue), but a system is in place to funnel uninsured patients from UCH to Dayton Street for follow-up services, said Amber Sobczak, a master of public health candidate at the CU School of Public Health. The approach involves Internal Medicine residents, who can use an email account to make referrals and schedule appointments at the DAWN Clinic for uninsured patients when they are discharged from the hospital.

For “high-risk discharges,” providers can arrange face-to-face handoffs, additional care coordination, and provider-patient contacts between the time of the discharge and the clinic visit, Sobczak said in an email. Next up, she said, is developing a process to transition the uninsured from UCH’s Emergency Department to the DAWN Clinic for primary care services. The goal is to roll that out by the end of the summer, she said.

The first night gave the students a taste of some of the challenges they will face in treating underserved patients. A 24-year-old mother of two suffering from asthma needed an inhaler – a relatively straightforward solution with an expensive price tag for someone with limited resources. The providers gave her a discount pharmacy card to help defray expenses but saw the need for a more permanent solution.
Both the young woman and a 36-year-old man who had not gotten sufficient follow-up care following a craniotomy were Spanish-speaking. The clinic staffs at least three interpreters each night it is open, Derington said, and can call UCH for help with languages the on-site interpreters aren’t familiar with. The craniotomy patient appeared to need not only medical care, but also behavioral health and possibly physical therapy services – evidence of the need for the team-based care the clinic provides.

Money matters. But the clinic may have cleared its greatest hurdle simply in opening its doors. The students started without funds to equip a space in a dilapidated building that needed extensive renovation. They won early support from CU School of Medicine Dean Richard Krugman, MD, who helped to get them meetings with the deans of the other Health Sciences schools to make their case. Amy Barton, RN, PhD, associate dean for clinical and community affairs with the CU College of Nursing, was another strong supporter, Krugman said, but all the deans contributed.

The schools have invested monetarily and continue to provide support to sustain the Opportunity Center over the next year, Derington said.

The students honored Krugman’s commitment by naming a work room at the clinic the “Krugman Care Hub.”

“IT’s a huge honor to have my name on the room,” Krugman said in brief remarks at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. “This shows that one should never underestimate the will of students and faculty to take care of the community.”

Second-year pharmacy student Claudia Corona is a community liaison with the DAWN Clinic.