

## “Whose Public Health Is It Anyway?”

Westminster Free Clinic has begun its 9th year providing free medical care to the homeless poor and the working poor in the Conejo Valley. It has been our honor to serve those of our brothers and sisters in need of medical care. To achieve our goal of providing a community public health safety net for those without insurance, we have enlisted a wide variety of adult and adolescent community volunteers. Those teenage volunteers come from all of the public and private High Schools in the Conejo Valley.

But, whose public health is it anyway? Let me give you some examples of how we have helped each and every citizen in the Conejo Valley by helping our neighbors. The following are some examples of our patients (I have changed their names):

Juan works in the salad bar of a popular local restaurant. “I do all the chopping” His hands have multiple cuts. He unfortunately bleeds into the salad “every once in a while.” Juan recently has felt tired and weak. His skin has turned yellow. We diagnose hepatitis B. We treat him and remove him from his job.

Carl was walking on Thousand Oaks Blvd when he was attacked by 4 teenage boys. They savagely beat him while shouting ethnic slurs. He is illegally in the United States since he was four years of age. Carl will not go to the police. He and his family and friends want to go out and “kill some white people, anyone....to get revenge” We calm him down and he understands that he should not perpetuate this cycle of violence.

Sam is released from the California Correctional Facility (jail) in San Diego to his old neighborhood in Thousand Oaks. He has spent the last 37 years in jail. He killed a man when he was 19 and then killed three other men while in jail. He has been a model prisoner for 27 years and is paroled with a prescription for Lithium and other psychiatric medication to control his anger and “paranoid schizophrenia with violent tendencies.” Unfortunately, while he is given a prescription....he is not given any money or insurance to purchase it. His 30 day supply is exhausted and he is starting to hear voices and “losing control.”

Mary paid a “coyote” to bring her into California from Mexico. Unfortunately, he mugged, raped and robbed her and dumped her in Thousand Oaks. She had broken ribs, a pelvic infection and a pregnancy from the rape.

Alex is a legal immigrant from Russia. He works as a chef at a local restaurant. He has a horrible fever, and is coughing up blood. We diagnose TB Pneumonia.... he is supporting his family here and in Russia and does not want to stop working... He tells us he tries not to cough on the other workers in the restaurant and he tries not to cough on the food.

Rob is depressed. His girlfriend has left him. He has no job and no money and no job skills. He came to California from Oklahoma looking for work and he has had no luck. He has decided to kill himself but “not before I get some news print”.

These and other examples demonstrate how the health of those around us in our community impact our own health. We can not ignore the impact of the recent closure of 11 public health clinics and one hospital in Los Angeles county. Nor can we ignore that approximately 19 percent of the residents of the Conejo Valley have no health insurance.

We have found a simple way to provide for some of that need while at the same time providing an opportunity to educate high school, college and medical school volunteers in the habits of community service.