

Impacting the Medically Underserved – Students can make a Difference

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Horace Mann, in the classic, yet brief treatise entitled *On the Art of Teaching* [1] urged teachers to lead pupils to discover truths for themselves; by so doing the teacher gives students a natural reward for every new discovery – which is one of the strongest incitements to future learning. Later, Mortimer J. Adler [2] suggested that all genuine learning is active, not passive. Learning involves the use of the mind, not just the memory. It is a process of discovery, in which the student is the main agent, not the teacher. There are, today, multiple strategies which allow students to be responsible and accountable for their own learning. A learning environment that has an instructor provide all the information is not the most effective [3]. Classroom experiences that result in students practicing, doing, preparing, evaluating are the most impactful. Likely, the most critical experience for nursing students is exposure to actual patients in actual real-life scenarios [4].

Results of literally thousands of studies indicate that simple lifestyle changes can maintain, slow down and may even reverse physical declines related to the aging process. While there are no guarantees, heart disease, cancers, Alzheimer's disease, stroke, diabetes, osteoporosis, and depression may be managed and/or even prevented via one's lifestyle. The reality is that anyone can improve his/her wellbeing by adopting healthy lifestyle behaviors. More recently, it is acknowledged that the link between lifestyle and morbidity/mortality is not only a Western issue; populations in Asia, Latin America, and probably Africa are also susceptible to metabolic syndrome and concomitant diseases of chronicity. However, what are the keys to changing behaviors of an entire citizenry? The ubiquitous questions of who, when, how, and where are simple, yet salient, and certainly complex when it comes to encouraging and ultimately changing one's way of life. Who holds

the key regarding prevention? Interventions aimed at changing lifestyles or behaviors, for an entire population, or even an individual are sometimes met with substantial skepticism. Additionally, enumerating the outcomes of intervention can be a challenge and require persistence and patience, as behavioral changes may take months or even years to yield positive results. However, noticeable and beneficial lifestyle changes in a population are indeed possible and warranted.

The faculty of the College of Nursing and Health Sciences at West Texas A&M University (WT) is actively engaged in scholarship including conducting applied research and evaluation; disseminating knowledge; developing new practices and clinical procedures; collaborating with external partners; and performing clinical service. The faculty of the college is committed to teaching excellence and maintaining high standards for classroom performance.

A total of 18 counties in the Texas Panhandle are identified as medically underserved. Not only is primary healthcare scarce, but access to primary and secondary prevention may be scarce as well. WT's College of Nursing and Health Sciences is moving into the future by providing citizens in the Panhandle the education, the opportunity, and the motivation to take personal responsibility for their health to help reduce the burden of costly preventable diseases of chronicity. We utilize a comprehensive, multidisciplinary team whose goal is to promote preventive health at the most local level of the community, improving the well-being of local citizens for generations to come.

One part of this prevention initiative, is the InnerCity Health Fair. The inaugural InnerCity Health Fair for the Homeless was held in the fall 2012. It started with a very limited budget consisting of what students could get donated by area businesses and community

individuals. Students were able to provide basic health screenings as well as toiletry and personal items such as socks, shampoo, and soap. The students were even able to secure a hot meal donated by an area restaurant. We saw 50 individuals for that first health fair and they were primarily homeless men. Our students gained knowledge and experience and we were able to reach and touch our community with nursing care.

Since that time, we have continued the health fair each semester - spring and fall. The fair is planned and executed by the Populations Nursing class located in the senior I semester of the nursing curriculum. Clientele for the health fair has grown to include low income families. Students have attracted multiple additional providers to lend services to the Fair including, Amarillo Public Health Department which has given immunizations and HIV testing; as well as Texas Tech Health Sciences Center School of Medicine offering pap smears for eligible women. WT's Family Nurse Practitioner students and faculty, have assisted with screening individuals and these students work with Heal the City during the health fair. Here are comments from two local agencies regarding the Health Fair and WT Students:

WT Nursing Students have shown excellent leadership abilities throughout the years at the InnerCity Health Fair. Twice a year, the team comes together to create a multi facet clinic that provides not only health screenings, but meets the physical and emotional needs of the community. The students are responsible for all the fundraising and recruiting of these events, such as vendors who provide food and entertainment for children, as well as professional beauticians who provide haircuts for those in need. These students come prepared with resources and counsel for all who come in need. Their compassion and skills to accomplish these tasks are remarkable and leave a lasting impact on the community.

Heal the City Free Clinic has had the opportunity to work with WTAMU Nursing Students over the past several years during the InnerCity Health Fair. Individuals from all over the Panhandle

attend the Health Fair and receive invaluable information regarding their health along with available community resources. The InnerCity Health Fair takes place in conjunction with (Heal the City's) Monday acute care clinic. Leading up to the event, Nursing Students place flyers at the Clinic. Patients are encouraged during their triage process to visit the Health Fair. It is refreshing to see a younger generation of medical professionals participating in their community in such an impactful way.

Through the InnerCity Health Fair, WT Nursing Students have been able to reach out to the community; help individuals clothe their families; discover unknown health issues; address emergency situations; and be responsible for their own learning. The lessons the nursing students are learning will go with them throughout their career; and the impact these students have on participants in the InnerCity Health Fair will last a lifetime.

While there are multiple challenges of community engaged nursing education (e.g., time; identifying community partners; planning projects that meet community needs as well as pedagogical outcomes; logistics; specific training and preparation) the potential outcomes of meaningful learning, and impacting the lives of others are profound [5].

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