



Senior Immunization Awards CASE STUDY

Hidalgo Medical Services Rural Training Track Family Medicine Residency

RED CARDS FOR RODRIGUEZ A FITTING MEMORIAL

A stack of red 3x5 construction paper cards graces the front desk at Hidalgo Medical Services (HMS), ready for distribution to each patient aged 65 and over who approaches for check-in. On one side is printed, in very large font, "65+." On the other is a five-question survey asking the patient to help identify barriers that can hinder access to flu and pneumonia shots.

To health care providers at HMS, a Red Card signals just one thing: *"Be sure to address this patient's vaccination status before s/he leaves today!"* The Red Cards invite a potentially life-saving conversation between an HMS staff member and patient about the preventive power of flu and pneumonia vaccines – discussions that otherwise could easily be neglected. Introducing this topic is of particular importance to older adults: the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that 90 percent of seasonal flu-related deaths in the United States occur in people 65 years and older!

HMS's potentially life-saving "Red Card" strategy was born from the unexpected loss of Idalia Rodriguez, a well-liked longtime community member who'd recently died at the young age of 65 due to complications from the H1N1 flu virus. Her death came as a huge blow to her family and community. While acknowledging that vaccines are not perfect,

could her untimely death have been prevented had she been immunized? What steps could HMS take to push seniors' immunizations into the forefront of preventive medicine at HMS?

Spurred on by this sad event, HMS applied for and received a \$10,000 2014-15 Senior Immunization Grant Award from the American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Foundation. Designating their project the *Idalia Rodriguez Memorial Immunization Project*, the four HMS resident physicians and a supporting cadre of community health workers and clinic faculty have spent the past year developing and implementing strategies to increase influenza and pneumococcal immunization rates among seniors 65+ served by HMS's new Family Medicine residency program. The Red Cards have proven to be a simple, high-impact reminder.

"HMS Day," an organization-wide senior health fair held at multiple clinic locations, also proved popular and effective. The event offered general health care screening and immunization education to the public and free vaccinations to those 65+. Not only did it show that novel, short-term interventions can be highly effective, it also provided the starting point for reconnecting patients with other needed health services. "In Lordsburg, NM, one of our visitors had not had health care for years," recalled Dr. Cid Sumulong, a Family Medicine resident who

contributed to HMS Day activities. “By discussing the benefits (and risks) of the immunizations, she plugged back into our organizational clinic system, is now established with a provider and is receiving regular primary care.”

Certainly their efforts have paid off! Hidalgo Medical Services has improved flu vaccinations for seniors by 11.5% and pneumococcal vaccinations by an impressive 43.6% over the past influenza season. But they’re not stopping there. Staff will continue to use the Red Cards as a permanent practice for future influenza seasons and hope to augment survey participation by also using tablet computers. Plans also include providing informational materials about immunizations and other preventive health actions on monitors placed in patient waiting areas. Future HMS Day events are likely. A newly established Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices application for mobile devices is now in place to guide the public regarding immunizations on an ongoing basis.

No one knows for sure why Idalia Rodriguez was not up-to-date on her flu or pneumonia shots. Perhaps she’d thought adults were really not all that susceptible. Perhaps she’d heard that vaccines were ineffective, or likely to trigger serious adverse reactions. Perhaps she’d faced transportation challenges and couldn’t make it to the clinic. Perhaps, with no “Red Card” to serve as a tangible reminder, Idalia Rodriguez simply missed the chance to have that potentially life-changing conversation about vaccinations with her physician before she got sick.

The death of Idalia Rodriguez heightened awareness that ordinarily preventable but dangerous illnesses can and do extract a deadly

toll on patients, particularly the elderly; certainly HMS staff members are working with renewed dedication to make sure their senior patients are thoroughly and accurately informed about the risks and benefits of vaccinations, and that flu and pneumonia shots are available, affordable and convenient. They do this in the fervent hope that the fate of their beloved Idalia Rodriguez will never befall another patient at HMS.