



Senior Immunization Awards CASE STUDY

Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School Family Medicine Residency

OUTSIDE HOSPITAL WALLS: A YEAR OF DISCOVERY

When 15 bright young physicians arrived in New Brunswick, NJ to start or continue their residency program at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson (RWJ) Medical School, they scarcely noticed the diverse community that lay just beyond hospital walls. By the end of the year, that vague image had come into much sharper focus!

Their “corrective lenses” were prescribed by two veteran faculty members, Karen Wei-Ru Lin, MD and Rhina Acevedo, MD. Both shared a commitment to train Family Medicine physicians who are not only clinically competent, but also equipped to serve a broader, less homogeneous population. They wanted to see their residents develop leadership skills, become sensitive to the special needs of the underserved, and learn how to partner with community-based organizations. To accomplish this, it was essential to provide residents with training opportunities that stepped outside traditional boundaries.

A \$10,000 American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) Foundation Senior Immunization Grant Award offered the perfect framework and opportunity! The resulting project set an overall goal of achieving a 25% increase in the number of patients over the age of 65 who had received flu and pneumonia vaccinations over the current baseline rate at RWJ Family Medicine at Monument Square. This was to be accomplished by June 1, 2015.

After introducing the immunization award activities and goals to the Family Medicine residents, Drs. Lin and Acevedo asked for one volunteer from each class in the three-year program to “champion,” or lead the effort. Dr. Jason Krystofiak threw his hat into the ring on behalf of the first-year residents. Drs. Yasmen Srour and Mary Ellen Lisman stepped up to represent the second and third-year classes (the two classes worked on grant-related tasks together).

Each class was responsible for completing specific project components. Under Dr. Krystofiak’s leadership, the first year residents created two educational videos and five sets of fliers (including a Spanish version) about influenza and pneumonia prevention and the possible health complications associated with each. Content was largely drafted on their own time, with most fine-tuning handled as a group. Krystofiak recalls script writing and video production as a great creative and bonding experience. “We had a lot of outtakes, a lot of fun.” Overall, he’s pleased with the way the team’s materials have been utilized. “I’m especially happy with the handouts. In addition to distributing them in the clinic, we also mailed them out to all patients 65+ (1,400 in all) to make sure no one was missed.”

Drs. Srour and Lisman led the second and third year residents in developing and presenting a Geriatric Preventive Care Lecture Series, PowerPoint slides and BINGO games

highlighting flu and pneumonia prevention, as well as other important healthcare measures. Additionally, their team collectively made 10 presentations to community-based groups on Influenza and Community Acquired Pneumonia, with five second year residents developing the PowerPoint slides to support the oral presentations. The combination of personal connections of Drs. Lin and Acevedo, plus RWJ University Hospital Community Relations Committee and Community Health Education division played a critical role in linking the presenters to appropriate audiences. "They made it easy for us to connect with various groups who are underserved, with different ethnic backgrounds and language barriers," said Dr. Srour.

The team reached out to a wide variety of venues beginning with the RWJ Wellness and Fitness Center, then moved on to senior citizen housing, homeless shelters, soup kitchens, health fairs and faith-based organization events. Following the sessions, uninsured participants over the age of 65 were invited to receive flu and/or pneumonia vaccinations on the spot.

It's obvious these experiences brought important insights to the Champion residents. Dr. Srour, who is Muslim, had not anticipated the opportunity to speak at a local Islamic Center but when it came up, the resulting connection was strong. "On that day, I went with Dr. Acevedo, two representatives from the RWJ University Hospital Community Health Education division and two representatives from the mosque. They were so warm, so welcoming and appreciative...they brought dinner and dessert, even took pictures of me presenting and loaded it onto their Facebook page with a special thank you." She relished the opportunity to "reach out to my own people" and to help them access immunizations and

other needed medical services. "It made me really realize the importance of getting outside the hospital walls. I never thought I would be giving presentations in the community and I personally didn't expect it to be so rewarding in the end. It's actually very important, and I feel I will do it in the future."

Dr. Lisman's view of what it means to be homeless was expanded on the night she visited Elijah's Promise soup kitchen to participate in a health fair held in conjunction with a county-wide "point in time" survey of the homeless population. This gave her a unique opportunity to chat with individuals who were living on the streets or in very unstable environments...and it was eye-opening! As planned, Dr. Lisman went through her standard presentation which always included a discussion of "Myth vs. Fact" relative to flu and pneumonia vaccines. (Mistaken beliefs often prevent individuals from getting vaccinated). But to her surprise, "many of *my own* misconceptions about the homeless population were debunked as well - such as it being mostly male or having a high correlation with substance abuse."

Dr. Krystofiak was gratified by the response he received after presenting on influenza and pneumonia vaccinations at nearby New Brunswick Apartments, a low-income senior housing complex. "I found the audience to be very interested in learning more - some even said they would tell their friends. If I can enlighten even one person who passes it on, that's two people I've been able to reach, and so on." But he was floored when, following his talk, a woman sought him out to privately question him about the medications she was taking. "She'd had a lot of problems and just hadn't been able to see her own doctor for quite a while. So she was grateful to see me and eager to talk to *any* physician about her issues."

All of the Champions noted that making themselves available following their formal presentations invited further communication with participants. “After one presentation,” Dr. Krystofiak adds, “an elderly gentleman came up to me to ask, ‘In addition to vaccinations, what else should I be getting at my age?’ This opened the door for a very constructive conversation.” As Dr. Srour noted, “I always felt that they left with more awareness of medical issues, how it may affect them and how they can better keep themselves healthy.”

Strong mentorship from Drs. Lin and Acevedo and a project structure that integrated community outreach activities into the regular residency curriculum went a long way towards keeping residents from feeling completely overwhelmed. Further, either Dr. Lin or Dr. Acevedo accompanied the residents to every outreach activity and to the Champion residents, they were the true superstars. “They didn’t just send us off to do the project—they came with us,” Dr. Lisman reported. “It was so motivating to see their dedication to the project, to helping out the different communities and offering hope for a healthier life.”

The experience of all three Champions demonstrates that effective mentorship can greatly impact or even change the trajectory of a resident’s career—even more so when combined with potent encounters with the real world. For Dr. Srour, the AAFP Foundation Senior Immunization project led her to her true calling. “I feel like a lot of second and third-year residents want to find a way to be more specialized in the field, I’m not going to lie. But I am one of those people who has definitely found that my heart lies with primary care. I’ve never been happier in my training than when out in the community.”

Dr. Lisman found her interest in serving the underserved and vulnerable populations had only strengthened through the project’s outreach activities. “In general when I entered the residency program, vaccinations with respect to the senior population specifically was not at the forefront of my thinking, and I certainly didn’t realize how important it can be to go into the community to do lectures. It is powerful! I want to do more next year as a third year resident and carry it on into my career. I want to go out and educate, to reach more people. Having this opportunity has reaffirmed for me that community education DOES work and that it’s worth doing.”

Like the other Champions, Dr. Krystofiak felt a rush of pride when he read the final report, saw the metrics and “realized that we’d achieved our goals and that what we’d done had made an impact. That actually meant something.” Through his Champion activities, he’s now able to visualize himself in a leadership role – to see that he personally could have an impact inside or outside hospital walls, perhaps even someday on public health policy. “I’m now much more aware that community access is very crucial at every level. There are so many people out there that have fallen through the cracks, and they do care about their health and about learning how to take care of themselves.”

Dr. Krystofiak summed it up this way: “I feel that when some of us go into the community, it shows strong community support. It shows that there are a lot of good people affiliated with RWJ Medical School and RWJ University Hospital that really do care.”