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FEATURED

Guest column

Guest column: VIM continues essential health service mission

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Photo courtesy IU Health.

This guest column was written by James Rickert, M.D., of Bloomington. He is a local physician who volunteers at the VIM Clinic and serves on its board of directors.

With the implementation of the Affordable Care Act and a better understanding of the origins of disease, healthcare delivery in the United States is undergoing a transformation.

This is particularly true at our local Volunteers in Medicine Clinic.

Like other local providers, we are working harder to keep our patients healthy and to address the causes of their illness rather than simply offering doctors' appointments to manage their various ailments.

As one might expect, this is a challenging task in the underserved population for which our VIM Clinic provides care.

At VIM, we are all grateful for the remarkable success of the ACA with its attendant increase in the rates of those medically insured.

This health insurance will greatly improve the lives of those now covered.

Unfortunately, even now, not all Hoosiers are eligible for medical insurance.

Due to vagaries within both federal and state law, a significant minority of our local residents remain uninsured.

These include the noncitizens who live and work among us as well as certain other low-income individuals.

Our VIM Clinic, therefore, continues to offer essential traditional medical care for individuals suffering from both chronic and acute diseases.

Furthermore, our clinic is increasingly focused on improving the health of patients by addressing the underlying causes of their illness.

Research has convincingly demonstrated that factors such as inadequate housing, poor nutrition, lack of transportation and health illiteracy are responsible for the majority of the high disease burden in people of low socio-economic status.

Policy makers and researchers have also demonstrated the cost-effectiveness of addressing such factors when caring for the indigent.

As an example, a homeless VIM patient required surgery on both of her carotid arteries, which were almost fully blocked. This was a potentially life-saving surgery.

The VIM clinic found a surgeon willing to donate the surgery, but only if the patient had a stable place to live for two weeks while she recovered.

After much work and many hours of phone calls, our VIM social worker was able to obtain funding to pay for a motel room for post-surgery recovery, and the patient was able to proceed with surgery. This type of high-intensity and resource-heavy care not only saves the lives and improves the health of our neighbors, like this woman, it also reduces overall healthcare costs for all of us over the long term.

There is no other local agency providing this kind of care management to the indigent in south-central Indiana, and at the VIM Clinic, we extend these services to all patients, whether insured by HIP or not, who need this kind of high-intensity, augmented medical care.

Within our community, there remains an urgent need to provide effective care for both the uninsured and for low-income patients who need intensive services to improve their health.

Our local VIM Clinic strives to fulfill this mission. It is demanding and resource-intensive work, but it benefits not just those whom we directly serve; this work benefits the entire community.

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