

# The Herald

## Frontera de Salud brings hope to uninsured patients

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BROWNSVILLE, Feb. 29, 2004 — When Cameron Park promotoras first brought medical students from the University of Texas Medical Branch to Gela Saldaña's home last year, they couldn't pinpoint the cause of her many symptoms.



Then Gabriel Perez thought he heard a murmur in her heart. He referred her to a specialist, and a few days later she was having open-heart surgery in Houston. She has recovered her health.

At the time, Perez was the student director of Frontera de Salud, a program comprised of students from UTMB in Galveston and UT's medical school at San Antonio, who take turns visiting Brownsville to treat patients who otherwise would have no care.

From its origin six years ago, Frontera de Salud has developed into a prototype for delivering medical care to underserved populations.

Earlier this month Dr. Kirk Smith took a group of UTMB officials to visit the project he helped found. Among them was UTMB's president, Dr. John Stobo.

In 1998, Smith, then a UTMB medical student, did a clinical clerkship at the Brownsville Community Health Center where he met Sister Maria Ceballos.

The nurse practitioner, who was holding weekly clinics at San Felipe de Jesus Catholic Church in Cameron Park, brought Smith to the colonia. Ceballos introduced Smith to the priest, the Rev. Michael Seifert, who wanted to improve access to medical care for the colonia's residents.

Smith told Seifert that while it was hard to get doctors to move to the area, it might prove useful to bring medical students.

When he finished his clerkship, he and some friends came back on several weekends.

Saturday mornings they did breast exams and pap smears at BCHC, attacking a two-year backlog of appointments.

Saturday afternoons they made house calls in Cameron Park — members of the church took them to people's homes. Sunday after Mass the students held screenings for high blood pressure and diabetes.

"It was a tremendous thing for most of the folks, who had never seen a doctor," Seifert told the dignitaries.

The ad hoc visits developed into Frontera de Salud.

The project had a two-fold effect: It brought some rudimentary medical care to people who otherwise would not have had it, and it opened the eyes of the medical students to the existence of a population they otherwise would never have had contact with.

Smith says Frontera de Salud gives UTMB students a chance "to see the need and act on their altruism. It's turning those students into advocates and having them see that they actually can do something."

In the long run, equipping professionals to become effective advocates may prove to be the project's greatest contribution to reducing disparities in health care access, Smith said.

Initially the students were just going into the colonia "recording horror stories," Smith said, but he noted, "We've evolved."

The students asked for an improved referral system and more training.

Out of their calls for a better structure grew what Smith calls the Integrated Community Health Project — an expanded version of Frontera's program.

Promotoras, community health promoters who serve their neighborhoods, play a vital role in it.

They go out into the community and locate the sick through neighbors and friends. Every Tuesday they meet with Alicia Gomez, the coordinator of San Felipe de Jesus' parish nurse program, and prepare a list of the sick. Gomez e-mails the list of patients and descriptions of the cases to the students so they can prepare for the home visits.

When the 20 medical students arrive, they divide into four teams. Each includes an upper-level medical student and someone who speaks Spanish.

The teams visit the homes of the sick accompanied by a promotora, who briefs them on the patients' social and economic situation and alerts the students to barriers that may affect their treatment.

The students can refer patients who should see a doctor to the BCHC, and the promotoras do follow-ups.

When the students asked for better training, UTMB physicians and nurses began donating their time to prepare them for their visits to Brownsville, offering instruction in topics of immediate concern, such as the pathophysiology of diabetes and how to do home visits.

Strengthening the skills of the promotoras has also become a crucial part of the evolving project.

The medical students now teach "mini-modules" for the promotoras on topics such as how to take a patient's blood pressure, how to use glucometers and how to treat ringworm.

UTMB's Stark Diabetes Center has given the promotoras materials about diabetes to use in educating the community.

And UTMB's Department of Preventative Medicine and Community Health is planning to send educators, including a medical resident, to provide instruction in breast, cervical and colon cancer.

"The promotoras are part of the team," Smith said.

Another part of the Integrated Community Health Project fell into place when Dr. Jorge Dominguez gave BCHC his clinic in Cameron Park.

Even colonia residents who lack transportation can get to the Delia Street facility.

The clinic is now staffed two afternoons a week by BCHC doctors. Starting in April, they will be joined by a Frontera de Salud resident, who will also make house calls two days a week, work with and train promotoras and teach a weekly nutrition class.

Residents are doctors who are doing post-graduate clinical training. This is the first time residents have participated in Frontera de Salud.

The resident will be available by cell phone to back up the students when they make home visits and will keep one afternoon a week open for appointments.

That means patients whom the students visit on the weekend can see a doctor within two or three days, if they need to.

Groups of medical students from UTMB now alternate visits with another chapter of Frontera that has been organized at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio. During the academic year, they make 10 trips to Brownsville between them.

"When neighbors see the students go in the house in their white coats, they bring their sick children," Gomez said. "This may be the first time they have ever seen a doctor in the whole time they have been here because most of these people are undocumented. They don't go to the doctor. They don't leave their homes a lot."

Other medical schools have experimented with programs like Frontera de Salud, Smith said, but they were worried about legal problems and insurance.

And, he added, they didn't trust their students to do a good job: The programs were dominated by faculty advisers, and the medical students became passive onlookers.

"UTMB believes in their students. They believe in their training," Smith said.

The students are "special people," Stobo said. "It's just so gratifying to see this kind of thing coming from students.

"I think (Frontera de Salud) can serve as a great model as to how you can provide medical education and patient care for the medically underserved," he added.

The Cameron Park project holds the promise of catching many people who now slip through the holes in the safety net.

"It's a great place to try to see if this can work both with the community and with other schools around the state," Seifert said. "(Cameron Park's) a great launching pad."