

# Medical Journal

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Photographed by KARINE AIGNER

## From Charity to Social Justice

WHEN THE SYSTEM FAILS, OPEN DOOR PROVIDES HEALTH OPTIONS



**P**hyllis Digirolamo is on disability, but the Croton resident says this doesn't preclude her from being finicky about healthcare. "Even though I have limited medical, I wouldn't be here at Open Door if I wasn't satisfied," she explains. "I'm very fussy, and Dr. Mueller is one of the nicest people and the most concerned doctors I've ever had."

Nneka Oliphant, an insurance agent, drives from White Plains to bring her eight-year-old son Nahsic to the Open Door Family Medical Center in Ossining because the care is affordable and the doctors are compassionate. "Nahsic used to get sore throats all the time, and he hates to have a throat culture done," explains Ms. Oliphant. "He needed help because he was fighting and really upset. They were nice about it here, and now he feels okay about coming to the doctor."

Nahsic's change of heart is a relief, says

Ms. Oliphant, who adds: "I also like that there is a dentist here. This means I don't have to go to more than one place to get everything done."

Established in 1972 with a grant from the Junior League of Westchester-on-Hudson, Open Door began as a volunteer-run clinic in the basement of the First Baptist Church in Ossining. Thirty years later, three Open Door centers—in Ossining, Sleepy Hollow and Rye Brook—offer medical care. The center in Ossining also provides dental and mental health care to patients.

Most of these patients are marginalized members of society, says Lindsay Farrell,

president and chief executive officer of Open Door. "These are housekeepers, groundskeepers, landscapers and restaurant workers; people who work for businesses that are always hardest hit when there is an economic downturn," she says. "I don't think the average person understands that 40 million people in this country don't have insurance. When they get sick, they are at a huge disadvantage."

The organization's empathy for the disadvantaged is what drew Dr. Christopher Wang, chief medical officer at Open Door, back to Ossining last year after a 10-year absence, during which he taught residents at

**Kimberly Campbell receives an examination from chief medical officer Dr. Chris Wang.**

Columbia University Hospital in Manhattan about the particulars of running a family practice in underserved neighborhoods. A graduate of Amherst and Boston University School of Medicine, Dr. Wang's social conscience was inherited from "a Depression-era, FDR, liberal Democrat" mother and "a conservative, first-generation Chinese immigrant" father, and was strengthened by the atmosphere of social activism in the 1960's.

Dr. Wang is the particular type of physi-

cian that Ms. Farrell hopes to hire. "We go for excellence in academic training, looking in top medical schools and residency training programs, but we also look for a commitment to the mission and the underserved," says Ms. Farrell. "You have to like working in this environment because it's frustrating being a doctor in this type of practice. You can provide the primary care; but if you're dealing with an adult patient who doesn't have insurance, you've got to make referrals for specialty care, and there is often no one to refer them to. Every doctor is basically negotiating, asking a patient how much money they have and how much they

est patients, Open Door has recently decreased the lowest fee from \$27.50 to \$25 per visit. But, says Dr. Wang, a patient will never be turned away from Open Door because he or she lacks funds. "We do expect them to work out some sort of payment plan," he says. "But we're comfortable being the bank to try to ease the curve a little bit."

Easing the curve for disadvantaged patients can be tough on the bottom line, says Ms. Farrell. "We can barely do what we're doing now," she explains. "We're going to operate at a deficit next year, but we feel that we're okay because we're in a cap-



can afford so they can identify where to send them."

The unavailability of affordable medication is another frustration that Open Door physicians often face. "When many of our patients leave here, they can't afford to fill prescriptions," laments Ms. Farrell. "It's one thing to provide the care, but if a patient doesn't take medications, it's a vicious circle."

Even with the hardships, Dr. Wang is content to be treating the patients he sees. "What makes it enjoyable for me is providing services for patients who really need it—not that people who are wealthy or middle class don't need it when they go to the doctor, but they have choices," he explains. "If this organization wasn't here, it's likely that many of these people would end up at the emergency room."

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a non-partisan research foundation based in Washington, D.C., says some in the middle class may soon have fewer choices, as it is estimated that two million unemployed workers will exhaust unemployment insurance benefits during the first six months of 2002. Though Dr. Wang has seen a few new patients who were recently laid off, it's the unemployed without insurance who concern him the most. "We're not seeing with the same frequency the folks who didn't have insurance to start with whose jobs are gone," he explains. "Because these patients no longer have cash to come in as often, they're sicker when they do come in."

In order to ease the burden for these poor-

ital campaign." Though leaner budgets generally decrease the monies for new programs, Open Door will be able to fund several new projects this year.

The new efforts will focus primarily on children. A dental clinic, funded by \$166,000 appropriated by Congress, opened in Rye Brook on May 1. Children in the elementary schools will be screened, and those who need it will have their teeth sealed. "We're going to have to build slowly, so we felt we could make the biggest impact on children at first," says Ms. Farrell.

Another project—a school-based medical program—will be in place by January 2003 in Port Chester. A \$150,000 grant, recently awarded Open Door by Congresswoman Nita Lowey, will fund a medical center in Thomas A. Edison School in Port Chester, the first of two. Open Door will apply for a planning grant this fall to fund the second clinic in the Port Chester Middle School.

Dr. Wang, who is in the process of recruiting doctors with cultural competency skills so they can go into communities to promote prevention and awareness, explains the organization's push beyond the walls of their current facilities: "We're trying to see ourselves as part of the larger community—both from an administrative and a public health perspective. We're doing things like



Open Door's president and chief executive officer Lindsay Farrell.

working with congregations to teach them how to do HIV testing in the churches, because it will be more comfortable for some people than coming into the centers and identifying themselves as someone wanting to have an HIV test."

Open Door's service to the HIV community is extensive. A program in place at each of the three centers oversees the case management for HIV patients who use private infectious disease doctors for their medical care. "This is all done gratis," says Sheila Lacey, who organized the program and writes the grants that fund it. "We're dealing with an outpatient disease now; our patients are well controlled on medication. But the challenging part of what we do is to try to figure out how we can help someone see their way to taking care of themselves."

Ms. Lacey and the other counselors at Open Door go out of their way to rise to these challenges, says Steven, who contracted HIV ten years ago from his first sexual partner. He depends upon the counselors for advice on such things as choosing the right health insurance plan and whether or not to take herbs. He's also grateful for the financial assistance the program offers when his insurance only partially covers the expenses.

Steven has attended support group meetings at the center in Ossining in the past. He says it's important to him that they are upbeat. "Truthfully, I don't want to be in a group where everyone's saying, 'You know, I'm dying.' We're all going to die. There are four people in my family who have been diagnosed with cancer in the last six months: that's dying. What I'm doing is controlling a disease."

Regardless of the issue, it's the attitude with which the care is given that satisfies Steven the most. "I usually have to start a new medication every few years because I

build up a resistance to the one I'm on," he explains. "I'm always nervous starting a new medicine because there are different side effects, so I'll say, 'I'm going to call you everyday and let you know how I'm doing.' We have that kind of one-on-one relationship."

This level of involvement is key to the Open Door model of patient care. "We try to create an atmosphere that supports the notion of human dignity that we feel so strongly about," Ms. Farrell says. "We want to be like a hotel, where we just bend over backwards. That's our approach to customer service. We believe that every individual deserves respect, regardless of his or her circumstances."

Ms. Lacey remembers one Ossining man in the HIV program who benefited from this Open Door brand of customer service. "He was unable to take his medications because he couldn't read," she explains. "Because he couldn't follow directions, he was extremely difficult to treat. We worked diligently with other groups in town and we had one pharmacist who would make sure he took his medication, but we watched him get sicker and sicker."

"He was so sweet," she continues. "He loved his bicycle, his dog and his room. We helped him to get his dog fixed and to fight a legal battle to keep his room when he was in danger of losing it. That's the nice thing about working in a community health center with a program this broad. We didn't have to let go of him. We saw him through to his death."

"We go a step further," says Ms. Farrell. "It's sort of hand-holding for patients who need it, though we can't do it for everyone because we're too lean for that. There's always so much more that needs to be done. Health care in the United States is not a right; it's a privilege. In the land of equal opportunity, what's up with that? At some point we're going to have to move from charity to social justice."

Open Door is located at 165 Main Street, Ossining. Tel.: 941-1263.

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