Practicing medicine

At the University’s Student Outreach Clinic, doctors-in-training run the show while providing a health care safety net for the community.

by JOANNA TRIEGER • photos by KATHLEEN GO ’16

Early on a Saturday morning, the waiting room at the University’s Student Outreach Clinic looks like any other. Between sips of coffee, a smiling staffer greets new arrivals and checks them in. Waiting patients tap on their phones. Medical brochures line the walls.

But there’s something different about this clinic. Here, under the guidance of supervising physicians, medical students are in charge of all clinic operations. Here, most of the patients don’t have health insurance, and virtually none will pay for their visits.

The Student Outreach Clinic, now located on campus in the Family Medicine Center, came into existence in 1996 when second-year medical students wanted a way to interact with patients while giving back to the community. Before clinical rotations start in their third year, medical students are typically focused on academics and have little patient contact.

“There are so many academic things for second-year students to worry about, like passing their boards and studying for tests,” says Professor and Chair of Family and Community Medicine Dr. Daniel Spogen, the clinic’s faculty advisor. “This clinic refocuses their attention on the true goal of medical school: learning how to care for patients. It teaches them the fundamentals so that when they start their clinical rotations in their third year they can hit the ground running.”

Second-year medical students, led by an elected executive board, run every

Visit the Student Outreach Clinic

WHERE: Family Medicine Center (corner of 17th St. and E. Stadium Way, on campus). RTC Bus Route 7 or the Sierra Spirit Bus will get you there.

WHEN: Most Saturday mornings and one Tuesday evening per month. Visit http://med.unr.edu/soc/clinics for a full schedule. No appointment is necessary.

visit > http://med.unr.edu/soc to learn more.
aspect of the clinic, from scheduling to marketing and finances to patient care under the guidance of a preceptor.

“The students run everything,” says Spogen. “They are the doctors in this setting, and the preceptors are there to help and guide them.”

Phillip Breslow ’15 (biology and community health sciences), a second-year medical student, was the clinic’s executive director for the 2016-17 year.

“It’s a mutually beneficial system,” Breslow says. “Without the clinic, many of our patients wouldn’t receive care, and this is really our first major opportunity to give back to the community. On the flip side, we get so much from the experience. We learn how to be better doctors.”

Grant funding originally provided resources for general and women’s health clinics. Now, with increased funding from community donors, the students are able to offer additional clinics in pediatrics, geriatrics and dermatology. Diagnostics, like blood work, can often be run in-house, greatly reducing or even eliminating the cost to the patient. As partnerships are created with other schools on campus, like social work and foreign languages, the scope and quality of care available to patients at the clinic is expanding each year. The combined clinics treat about 800 patients annually, and virtually all services are offered for free.

“The patients served here are those who have trouble accessing health care. Either they have insurance and they can’t get in to see their primary care provider, or they don’t have insurance,” says Spogen. “At the Student Outreach Clinic, we don’t ask them any questions about their insurance coverage or their ability to pay. Even when we’re treating patients for chronic conditions, our care is free of charge. It’s a true safety net.”

Maria* has been coming to the women’s health clinic for four years.

“I don’t have medical insurance, so if I couldn’t come here I don’t know where I would go,” she says. “The doctors here are really good.”

As a native Spanish speaker, Maria takes advantage of the clinic’s translation services, also provided by students.

“I understand a little bit of English, but when the doctor is speaking it is very specific, so I love to have the translator. They are in the room every time I visit.”

Hailey*, a master’s student in social work at the University, visited the Student Outreach Clinic for the first time for a minor surgical procedure.

“The doctors were amazing,” Hailey says. “I was told elsewhere that this procedure could be a bit complicated and could even create some scar tissue, but they did it in 10 minutes, and it was painless. I’d definitely come back.”

She also appreciates the clinic’s focus on connection to local services.

“Before the procedure, they had me take a survey about my housing situation and access to social services. It’s really cool to see that they’re looking at patients from a social work perspective.”

Support from community partners like the Nell J. Redfield Foundation, Aspire Capital Partners (formerly Abowd & Rose Financial Group) and Patricia D. Cafferata, Esq. (in memory of Dr. H. Treat Cafferata) has been integral to the success of the clinic.

“Grants and donor funding have been essential in creating the Student Outreach Clinic and transitioning it from a small, off-site operation into what it is today: a full-service clinic with advanced testing and diagnostic capabilities,” says Dr. Thomas L. Schwenk, dean of the School of Medicine. “The generosity of our donors combined with the passion and enthusiasm of our students makes this an outstanding resource for patients in the community.”

From the students who run the clinic to the administrators and donors who make it possible, the focus is clear: serving patients. When asked what he would like the community to hear about the clinic, Phillip Breslow doesn’t miss a beat.

“Come see us,” he says. “We’d love to have you here.”

*Patient names have been changed.