

Free-clinic director advocate for underserved

MAXWELL REIL, Staff Writer | Posted: Sunday, April 17, 2016 9:54 pm

Dr. Elizabeth Crowley, 44, of Upper Township, is the medical director at Volunteers in Medicine of Cape May County. VIM is a free clinic for the uninsured and underserved.

Although this is only a part-time position, she is a 24/7 advocate for patients and is looking to open a second VIM location in Atlantic County.

Question: When did you decide you wanted to pursue a career in health?

Answer: When I was 8, I broke my wrist, and when I saw the X-ray I thought it was the coolest thing ever. For the longest time, I wanted to be a radiologist, but after my first rotation in medical school in a tiny town in western Pennsylvania, I fell in love with family medicine. Family medicine encompasses care of the whole patient, in the context of family and community.

Q: How did you start at the Volunteers in Medicine?

A: I actually had been interested in VIM for several years before I started working there. I even met with the director and filled out an application, but with small kids and a busy solo practice, it didn't work out. Fortunately, when the medical director position opened up five years ago, it was a perfect time in my life to add VIM.

Q: You decided to rewrite VIM's entire patient intake process. Why was that?

A: We try to be as much like a "regular doctor's office" as we can, but our patients face a different set of challenges than the general population.

So we ask the usual questions: "Have you had surgery? What medications are you on?" But we take it a step further.

We ask things like, "Do you have trouble getting food? Do you have a refrigerator? How do you get to your medical appointments?" Because if they have trouble paying for food, they are certainly going to have trouble paying for medications.

If they have to rely on a ride to get to appointments, we need to consider that when scheduling. We must consider what some call the "social determinants of health." If their home life, or job, or financial situation is contributing to their illness, which it almost always does, ordering medications and tests won't solve the problem.

Q: You're apparently opening a new VIM location in Atlantic County?



Volunteers in Medicine

Dr. Elizabeth Crowley of Volunteers in Medicine in Cape May Court House.

A: About 18 months ago, a private foundation in Atlantic County approached us and said, “We love what you are doing in Cape May County. We want to help fund you to do it here”... So we’ve been working on determining what needs we can best fill in Atlantic County and finding space. It’s starting to fall into place and we plan to open in Atlantic County in late summer.

Q: What satisfaction does a free clinic bring you?

A: I have never worked with a team that brought such a variety of strengths to the table and worked together so well. We keep each other balanced and smiling. And we get to work with a group of volunteers that share our passion to provide care to the uninsured and underserved. Working with volunteers is so refreshing, because everyone — providers, nurses and office staff — are there because they want to be.

Q: How much does it mean to spend time with your patients? How much help can it be for a physician to be as familiar with a patient as possible?

A: They teach in medical school that most of the time if you let the patient talk long enough, they will give you the diagnosis. It’s our job to listen to what our patients say, apply our knowledge and experience to what they are describing, only then confirm the diagnosis with examination or testing, then treat. I can’t usually do that in 10 minutes. And, again, if there are problems other than the medical issue, a lost job, a sick spouse or parent, or financial issues, the patient is going to have those concerns as well, which might interfere with the ability to follow the medical orders.

Q: Can you talk about some of the network of resources you’ve developed at VIM?

A: As part of our goal to address of the social and economic factors affecting health, we have been fortunate to work with some great “nonclinical” community agencies. We refer regularly to local food banks, to Family Success Center, division of vocational rehab,

Q: What we are talking about isn’t necessarily a doctor’s duty, is it?

A: No, but neither is arguing with insurance companies. And this is much more fulfilling. Actually, maybe it is. If we want people to be well, we have to figure out what needs to happen to make that possible. Our patients often don’t have a background of knowing how to make healthy choices or take actions to improve their health. We’ve made our job to help them learn those life skills.

Q: What are your plans for the next few years? What do you want to accomplish?

A: We are working on several new health and wellness initiatives, again to address the issues we see interfering with patients' overall health. A local scout from Troop 55 will be building us a vegetable garden for his Eagle Scout project to provide fresh veggies to our patients who can’t always get fresh produce.

We are starting a walking club. A local yoga instructor will be giving free yoga classes to our patients starting in May.

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