



STREET MEDICINE

San Antonio medical students share their perspectives and experiences

By Matthew Hennessey, Alvin Boyd Newman-Caro, Kaleigh Longcrier, and Hans Bruntmyer, DO

Matthew Hennessey

The medical field has a call to help those in need, but in a day and age where there is an increasing focus on the business of medicine, there can often be gaps in the system that leave certain populations wanting for care. Street Medicine aims to fill one of those gaps by going directly to the streets to treat a group that is often marginalized and undertreated, the unsheltered homeless population.

The field of Street Medicine is one that has grown out of the need to simply meet people where they are and lend a hand; but this type of care is more than going out and performing first aid. Above all, Street Medicine is about creating relationships with others, entering the patient's world and interacting with them as equals. It's not about

asking "what can I do for you" it's about asking, "what is your story." It's about going out into the patient's world with no preconceived notions but with listening ears. There are many days spent on the street just talking to people, asking their name, listening to their story. Street medicine exists even on days when there are no medical needs but simply just conversations.

Alvin B. Newman-Caro

Traditionally, medical education features a considerable emphasis, the first two years, on the science of medicine. This emphasis is understandable given the complexity of the human body and the increasingly complex means by which physicians seek to treat diseases. But the scientific regard for patients, emphasized over and over again in

the cases and vignettes with which students learn in those first two years, promote student's conceptualization of patients as biologic puzzles rather than people. My experiences in Street Medicine-San Antonio have helped me to counter this dehumanizing habit of thinking. Through these experiences I have been able to remind myself of the calling that drew me to medicine – caring for persons who are suffering, rather than solving a biologic puzzle.

When I befriended a homeless gentleman who refused to seek medical treatment for his serious leg wound, I learned the importance of caring for a person holistically, as opposed to remedying something that is broken in the body. His leg was severely necrotized, likely due to a venomous spider bite and the wound was already infected. If



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he didn't seek treatment immediately, he risked having to have his leg amputated, or die from sepsis. Although he allowed me to clean and bandage his wound, he refused to go to the hospital. However, that did not stop Street Medicine from visiting him weekly to check the status of his leg and reemphasize the paramount importance of receiving treatment at the hospital. Over time, the gentleman developed a trusting relationship with us and finally decided to go to the hospital.

When I asked him what finally motivated him to seek treatment, the man shared a humbling story with me. He was exploited by a local gang to test their newly synthesized drug products. All his life he was surrounded by bad people, manipulating him to do bad things for their benefit. It wasn't

until he met Street Medicine volunteers that he finally had people tell him to do the right thing. All he had ever known were people that deceived and mistreated him. It took him some time to understand that the people of Street Medicine are different. We wholeheartedly cared about him, thought about him, prayed for him. When he realized this, he was inspired to seek treatment, as well as pursue a life absent of drugs with the ultimate goal of rising out of homelessness.

I no longer perceive health as simply the absence of disease. Health is intertwined with body and spirit. It was obvious that our friend was physically injured and required an immediate fix. However, it wasn't until his spiritual wellness was cared for that he was able to be physically healed. Street

Medicine is an out-of-the-classroom learning experience that is highlighting this important aspect of medicine and provided me with eye-opening experiences that I will continue to build upon throughout my medical career.

Kaleigh Longcrier

You can't really understand what Street Medicine is like unless you get out and go yourself. As a student, Street Medicine has been an incredible opportunity to observe medical skills that I have not learned yet and practice the limited skills that I have learned thus far. As a future physician, I am learning valuable insight into the multidimensional entity that we call health. I'm learning that health and well-being are much more than numbers on lab tests but include intimate

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Her failing deep blue eyes were sunken into her face, highlighted by her dark, weather-worn, leather-like skin. She held my hand with a gentle yet intent grasp, looking into my heart, peering into my soul.

She began speaking to me, and, I couldn't help but feeling that I was hearing from God.

"Never lose your sight" she told me.

The rest of her words seemed to flood over me – with one central message – don't stop seeing.

I squeezed her cold hands in assurance that I would not, and looked into her sweet blue eyes before I got up from the pile of her blankets and belongings and stepped out of her tent.

— Kaleigh Longcrier

details of our personal lives. I'm also learning about the importance of compassion and the impact that caring and believing in someone can have on their health. This experience is shaping me into the future physician I hope to be and the type of student and person I want to be, now. It reaches beyond my experience as a medical student and influences my interactions with people on a daily basis. It wouldn't be exaggerating to say that it is life-changing.

Hans Bruntmyer, DO

Most of us went into medicine to care for others; however, if you practice medicine long enough, you're likely to get burned-out due to many factors. The way I found to regain my zeal for medicine was to care for those who have been marginalized by society. Being able to take the classroom to the streets and help future physicians learn empathy, compassion, and

professionalism has been very rewarding.

As noted above, the impact has been real for our students. Matthew describes how asking our patients their story helps us, but more importantly this helps the patient know we care when the rest of society seems to have turned their backs on them. As Boyd and Kaleigh mention, understanding that caring for a patient holistically can be 'life-changing', not just for the patient, but also for us, the providers.

When you actually hear the marginalized patient's stories you see the daily struggle of trying to climb out of the 'crab bucket' and yet get pulled back down. You see firsthand the intense hold addiction and mental health issues have on a person's life.

Is it worth going out on the street and caring for the 'throw-aways' of our community?

I believe we are all made in the Image of God and therefore should honor God by caring for the least of these... this work is 'life-changing.'

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