



Health Leads volunteer Serena Yin shows a client how to find resources online at a hospital in Baltimore.

Follow the Leaders



Komal Kothari

An innovative nonprofit helps fill gaps in medical care for the poor.

+ For many Americans, going to the doctor is pretty routine. Your illness is diagnosed, you're prescribed medication, and you're sent home with some advice on how to stay healthy. But for the low-income residents of Washington Heights, a largely immigrant community in New York City, getting medical care can be a lot more complicated. More than 54,000 of them don't have medical insurance. Seeing a physician can take hours of waiting in line. And when they do reach the physician, the orders they're given can be hard to follow.

"Even if their illness is easily treatable with a prescription,

receiving one is often the beginning of a whole new set of challenges," notes Komal Kothari, project coordinator for the nonprofit organization Health Leads. "If the prescription comes with detailed instructions written in English and the patient's only language is Spanish, the doctor's words are basically meaningless."

That's where Health Leads comes in. The organization has carved a small but important niche in America's health-care system, solving significant logistical problems that many doctors don't often consider. Founded in Boston in 1996, the organization has spread to five additional cities: Providence, R.I., New York, Chicago, Baltimore,

and Washington, D.C. The charity is powered by an army of 660 student volunteers, and last year alone it helped more than 6,000 families find the resources they need to stay healthy: nutritious food, quality housing, clean water, and safe places to get vigorous exercise.

FOOD PRESCRIPTIONS

At the Washington Heights Family Health Center, signs of how Health Leads has improved the quality of care are everywhere. Doctors at the hospital use Health Leads' custom-made pads, on which they can write "prescriptions" for such items as fresh vegetables, *food stamps* (government-issued coupons that can be exchanged for food), and

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Top: DeSantis Breindel; Inset: Joshua Kors

after-school programs where young people can get proper exercise. At the Health Leads counseling booth in the waiting room, student volunteers help patients get their customized prescriptions filled.

Kothari, 20, is a senior at nearby Columbia University. She began working with Health Leads in 2009 as a student volunteer and is now a project coordinator. One day a week, she counsels patients at the Health Leads desk. "I was born in India and moved to this country when I was 6," she says. "In India, poverty is almost always tied to poor health, and I noticed here that in the U.S., there is that same link. I figured, by volunteering, I could do something to change that."

The work can be emotionally taxing, Kothari says, as she sees with each patient how badly Health Leads' assistance is needed. Many patients, including children, are *obese*. Patients who are obese have a dangerous excess of body fat that pushes body weight 20 percent or more above normal. "Junk food that's high in sugar is so cheap, and fresh fruits and vegetables are so expensive. Many families tell me they simply don't have the money to eat right," says Kothari. "Their kids need exercise to stay healthy, but finding a safe place to play or an affordable after-school program can be a challenge too."

Obesity can lead to a range of serious illnesses. Chief among them is type 2 diabetes. (See "Diabetes Typology.") Type 2 diabetes has become a common struggle for the residents of Washington Heights. Health Leads has developed close relationships with nearby food banks, which open their doors to patients in need of nutritious food. It also connects families with after-school programs where children can get the vigorous exercise their bodies need to hold down their weight.

"Eating well and getting exercise may seem like no-brainers to people outside the community,"

says Jocelyn Howard, a student at Columbia University and a Health Leads volunteer. "But for many patients, it's not so simple. Many resources are easy to find online. But then, some families don't have Internet access. If the patients need government assistance, like food stamps, they could go directly to the government office and wait in line. But then, how are they going to get the time off work? And while they're waiting in line, who's going to take care of their kids?"

FILLING THE NEEDS

Kothari says that it is particularly rewarding when her work changes a patient's situation. What she didn't expect is how much her interactions

with patients would change her. "I'm a premed student, and working up close with patients like this has exposed me to a totally different side of medicine," she says. "I'm seeing things from the patient's point of view. And I think that will help me become a better doctor. I'll be more culturally aware."

Kothari has a message for young people who feel inspired to volunteer with Health Leads. "It's a great organization, and students should check it out. But if that isn't possible, students should look to their own communities and ask themselves, 'What would it take for our community to get healthy?' Figure it out; then step in and fill that need." **CS**

Diabetes Typology

Diabetes takes two main forms. In *type 1 diabetes*, the pancreas is unable to produce *insulin*. Insulin is a hormone that enables cells to take up *glucose*, the body's main source of energy. In *type 2 diabetes*, the body's cells are unable to use the insulin the pancreas makes.

Role of Insulin

Stomach changes food into glucose.

Pancreas produces insulin.

Insulin enters bloodstream.

Glucose enters blood vessels.

Type 1

Type 1 diabetes is an inherited disease that usually strikes in childhood. The immune system attacks the pancreas, destroying the cells that make the hormone insulin. Glucose builds up in the bloodstream, leading to the symptoms of diabetes (tiredness, excessive thirst, blurred vision). Daily doses of insulin are required.

Type 2

Type 2 diabetes tends to strike people of any age who are overweight and inactive. The body's cells lose their ability to absorb glucose. Bloodstream builds up in the bloodstream, leading to the symptoms of diabetes. People who have type 2 diabetes are instructed to lose weight, start an exercise program, and adhere to a special diet. Some require medication.

Insulin removes excess glucose and helps glucose enter cells.