Delivering Health Care in the Field

PA Program Brings Health Care to
THERE WAS A LOOK OF CONCERN on the Emory University PA student's face.

Sure enough, after she took an EKG of the migrant farmworker who had complained of chest pains, the results confirmed her worst fears: an evolving myocardial infarction. The PA student asked the 30-year-old man to wait and briefly left him to help arrange for emergency transportation to the local ER. By the time she returned with PA Tom Himelick, the patient had disappeared.

"[The farmworker] was from Mexico, and his history was that his father died when he was very young," recalled Himelick, project coordinator. "The people in his home community said a witch had put a curse on his father and he had dropped dead. To us, it sounded like he probably had a strong hereditary history of early cardiac disease."
Migrant workers line up for
the morning session of the
South Georgia Farmworker
Health Project.

THE PA STUDENT, who spoke fluent Spanish, went
around the camp, asking other migrant workers about the
cardiac patient. She quickly discovered that the young man
was scared to go to the local hospital.

"[The PA student] became a patient advocate," Hime-
luck said. "She convinced [the farmworker]‘s friends to
tell her where he was. She went and found him, talked to
him and essentially said, ‘I will go with you, hold your
hand there and be with you,’ and she did. At the hospi-
tal, it turned out that the patient had positive cardiac
enzymes, so she may well have saved his life."

Since 1996, Emory PA students have gone to the
farmland of southeast Georgia, where they set up mobile
health clinics for the migrant farmworkers. Working
in teams of PA students and faculty, the South Georgia
Farmworker Health Project typically provides health care
to 1,500 to 1,700 migrant and seasonal farmworkers dur-
ing a two-week project in July, and to 270 to 300 migrant
and seasonal farmworkers during the October weekend
project.

This year, the farmworkers project was chosen to be the
focus of the Host City Prevention Campaign 2010.
The project will receive a $10,000 check at AAPA 2010.

Annual Conference in Atlanta in May. HCPC is sup-
ported by AAPA, the PA Foundation, the Physician As-
sistant Education Association, and the Student Academy
of AAPA.

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workers and their families, using a mobile outreach
model to set up triage camps right in fields and migrant
camps. Students and faculty are joined on the project by
local volunteers, interpreters, nurses, Emory physical
therapy and medical students, pediatrics and family
practice physicians.

"This project has a tremendous impact on both mi-
grant farmworkers and the PA students and faculty," said
Himeluck, who is also the director of community projects
at Emory. "Plus, the South Georgia Farmworker Health
Project is a good opportunity for people to know what
a PA is and not just to patients we serve but community
people and other health care professionals who join us
on this project. From a professional standpoint, that is
probably one of the good things to come out of it."

Considering the farmworkers project receives no
federal or state funding, or any Emory tuition money,
The project provides free outpatient care to farmworkers and their families, using a mobile outreach model to set up triage camps right in fields and migrant camps. Students and faculty are joined on the project by local volunteers, interpreters, nurses, Emory physical therapy and medical students, pediatricians and family practice physicians.

Himellick said, “From the standpoint of the person who has pasted together the budget every year since starting it, having the $10,000 (NCPC) contribution towards our expenses is wonderful; we are really appreciative and excited to have this happen.”

Jodi Sindelar, an Emory PA student, has worked with the farmworkers project on two occasions. She believes that involvement in the project will have great impact on her future career as a PA.

“This was really my first experience being able to work directly with my own fellow colleagues in a PA-to-PA atmosphere, alongside my preceptors and other health care providers,” said Sindelar, who graduates this month and hopes to go into pediatric gastroenterology.

“In the beginning, it is really overwhelming when you have a huge, long, continuously growing line of patients and it’s 11:30 at night. But knowing that you can rely on your fellow classmates and colleagues to get everything done and that we are going to be able to help the migrant farmworkers and their families was something that we all felt by the end of the night was a huge accomplishment. It was a great experience being able to actually help...
Emory PA student Jodi Sinderer examines a patient during the South Georgia Farmworker Health Project.

people who were genuinely appreciative of the care that they were receiving.”

The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that the number of migrant farm and seasonal workers in south Georgia annually exceeds around 100,000 per year. And the Kaiser Family Foundation notes that this region is one of the top eight states for migrant/seasonal farmworkers in the US.

According to the 2016 Georgia Farm Gate Value Report, the cultivation and harvest of fruits and vegetables in Georgia have a net value of approximately $1.13 billion per year. Yet, pickers in Georgia live in poverty, with the national annual income range reported in the National Agricultural Workers Survey between $10,000 and $12,000. Despite this finding, the Internal Revenue Service reports that 38 percent of farmworkers in the US reported an annual income under $10,000 in 2007.

Migrant workers live in “rough” camps, which are usually 15 to 20 miles from the nearest town with limited access to transportation to get to an emergency room or health clinic. With limited finances and language barriers, many fear the red tape; nevertheless, they often refuse to leave the sometimes hostile reception they receive from the local population.

“I think they feel some hostility and recognize that it is a country other than their own, but most of us don’t know how hard they work,” said Hindsick, who with the help of the Southwest Georgia Area Health Education Center, began the South Georgia Farmworker Health Project back in 1996 as a small, five-day pilot project with eight PA students, three faculty, and one physician. “We have all heard them say over and over to us, ‘Thank you for being as kind.’

“So I believe this project has an impact on an individual level; someone—in this case a PA student—taking the time to talk to someone even if their complaints could be managed with medications from Wal-Mart or at least helping them to understand. Or maybe helping them know how to avoid getting their feet reinfected with athletes foot.”

The farmworkers project is organized as a walk-in...
Emory PA student Nicole Jaeger examines a patient after taking her medical history during the South Georgia Farmworker Health Project.

"A lot of times we just provide a general primary care checkup because many of the migrant farmworkers have never been seen by a medical provider before," Sindelar said. "I recall seeing a 65-year-old gentleman, and I was the first health care provider that he had ever seen and he had been coming across the U.S. for 40-plus years. He wanted a general checkup to learn about what he should eat and the kinds of things he could do to keep himself healthy. It was truly an honor to sit with this amazing man, share with him preventive health care measures and simply listen to the stories from his past. I learned more from this 40-minute visit than any medical book could ever teach.

"Other times, we do find acute illnesses. Upon arrival at a campsite, a woman was actually in the midst of having a placenta previa. She was going into labor and having a lot of abdominal pain. This was her first child, and she had had no prenatal care because of lack of access. She was extremely scared but so thankful that we were there to assess and get her the help that she needed."

If needed, follow-up care is provided at the Migrant Farmworkers Clinic in Lake Park, Ga., or at the Decatur County Farmworker Program clinic in Bainbridge, Ga. Himelick said the students' learning did not end with their health care experience.

"There is a kind of gradual realization from students saying, 'Oh, what a wonderful thing that we are doing and we are providing care to these underserved people, to them starting to reflect on the contributions that these patients are making to their lives, to their own comfort and to our food supply,'" said Himelick. "I had a student who wrote in her essay that going down to south Georgia is just trying to pay back a little bit of that debt. She said she owed this to the people who was taking care of because they take care of people everyday. This was the kind of of an 'oh-ha' moment, and she is right!""

For more information on the South Georgia Farmworker Health Project, visit http://www.emorypa.org/community involvemead.htm.

South Georgia Farmworker Health Project Receives Needed Support

This year, the Emory University PA Program's South Georgia Farmworker Health Project (SGFHP) was chosen to be the face of the Most City Prevention Campaign 2010. The project will receive a $50,000 check at Impact 2010, AAPA's 39th Annual Conference in Atlanta May 29 – June 3. MCPC is supported by AAPA, the PA Foundation, the Physician Assistant Education Association and the Student Academy of AAPA. For more information, we visited SGFHP audio/visual show URL is PA.