

She keeps health center on c

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MIDDLETOWN - Hidden among the historic buildings on Main Street in the North End is a non-profit that is changing the way Connecticut thinks about health care.

The Community Health Center counts among its employees graduates representing almost every Ivy League school in the country, and prides itself with the excellent and all-encompassing aspects of the service it provides.

Vice President and Clinical Director Margaret Flintner stepped over the threshold of the health center on Oct. 21, 1980, after receiving her masters degree from Yale University.

Her responsibilities then were what she loves more than anything - providing health care for patients. She spent a considerable amount of time under the tutelage of Dr. Carl Lecce, learning what she could from him in respects to what she calls "the fine art of health care."

A lot has changed in 25 years.

"When I first came here, the entire health center was located in one hallway of the Main Street building," says Flintner. "Carl had one room, the dentist had one room, and I had another. That is how we got our first real grip on how we were going to provide our very personalized, community-oriented care."

In the last quarter-century, the building has become a labyrinth of rooms and hallways, hosting some of the finest medical care in Connecticut. "We provide medical services, mental health services and dental services," Flintner explains.

"We also operate a program called New Horizons, a domestic violence center, and Oasis, which is a program for people living with HIV and AIDS. We also are involved in an exercise program with Vinny's Jump and Jive on Main Street, and a mindfulness meditation workshop.

"We also have a great prenatal program."

Recent studies have shown that there are correlations between dental



Vice President and Clinical Director at The Community Health Center in Middletown. Her office beside a framed picture of herself that was taken her first year at the

ahead of the times, Flintner has merged both aspects together.

"The prenatal program has a relationship with our dental program, since studies show ties in birth weights and dental care, we just want to make sure that expectant mothers get the prenatal dental care they need."

Flintner has had a dominant role in most of the CHC's health care breakthroughs.

"It's been clearly shown that when we make a discovery at the bench level, the science level, it takes 17 years to make it a regular part of everyday medical practice. At the health center, it takes us a discussion, often a heated discussion, some really spirited debate, and some logistical figuring out, and then we get started on at least implementing it."

Health Center. "Almost as soon as the research is there, that's when we get started. We are evidence-based and groundbreaking." Their model of health care is not to disregard normal medical procedure, but to embrace the innovative, and creative ideas, based solidly on research and scientific facts.

"The spirit of the Health Center is that if there is a better way to do something, not just because it is new and different, but if the evidence and the science, and the art of health care tell us we should be doing something, we come up with strategies to implement our idea."

This is no average institution. "What's remarkable is that we defy all stereotypes and all expectations of what happens to people who are often lower

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The Health

Health center on cutting-edge of care



Susan Burgess/The Middletown Press

ical Director at The Community Health Center in Middletown for 25 years, Margaret Flinter stands in a framed picture of herself that was taken her first year at the center.

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from another country or culture, often have three or more chronic diseases, and often do not have the social support we might provide. We take all of those people and provide the best care."

The CHC is able to do these things because they do not fit into any given mold.

"You can't do these things in the traditional model," says Flinter. "The best physicians or nurse practitioners in private practice cannot, in my opinion, take good care of these patients because they need to pull in so much more help and resources. You have to be able to access someone who speaks another language, if the patient requires so, and you need to have the resources to treat three or four multiple illnesses."

20 to 25 percent of their patients have Gold Card insurance. They can go anywhere for their medical treatment; but choose to come to the Health Center.

"People with choice will vote with their feet, it's the quality, the service, the respect, and the good care," Flinter says. "People know good care when they get it, and we take a lot of pride in that."

Flinter took a short sabbatical to Washington, D.C., in the mid-eighties, and when she returned, things at the Health Center slowly began to change. "When I came back in 1987, we really started to develop a model for community-based health care on the organizational side. The clinical side is always developing in breadth

back then was to embrace the business of health care. "I think on the business side, it has certainly been challenging and exciting. It's a big entrepreneurial organization. We love the business of healthcare, and we are not embarrassed to call it the business of healthcare. It is about quality, it's about service, it's about being successful financially, and taking those dollars and investing them into what we do. That is how we got to be in New Britain, New London, Meriden, Clinton and Old Saybrook."

One of the constant barriers that have haunted Flinter and the Health Center has been public misperception. "The general public tends to not know we exist, no matter how much (Dwight Blint, public relations manager) does to get us out there. But we just focus on the community and their needs."

"The stereotype is that the clinicians are volunteers, that the ceiling tiles are falling down, that the linoleum is buckling up, that when you are sick you have to go to the emergency room because there is nowhere else to go. We have blown up every one of those stereotypes."

Flinter had final decision in choosing the people who would continue the Health Center's traditions and values into the future.

"I hand-picked every single one, most of the dentists, most of the therapists. They are a tremendous group. If you look at their resumes, I call them the "blue chippers"; almost everyone has a Yale, Harvard, Columbia, Princeton degree and a professional training residency."

Her hope is to keep them here, in Connecticut, practicing the Health Center's collective vision on health care for many years to come.

"Our goal is for these people to do what I, Carl Lecce and Mark Masselli, and a good number of other people have done, which is to say, this is our career, not just a two-year stopover and then go someplace else.

"The greatest thing would be for our patients to have a family dentist who knows