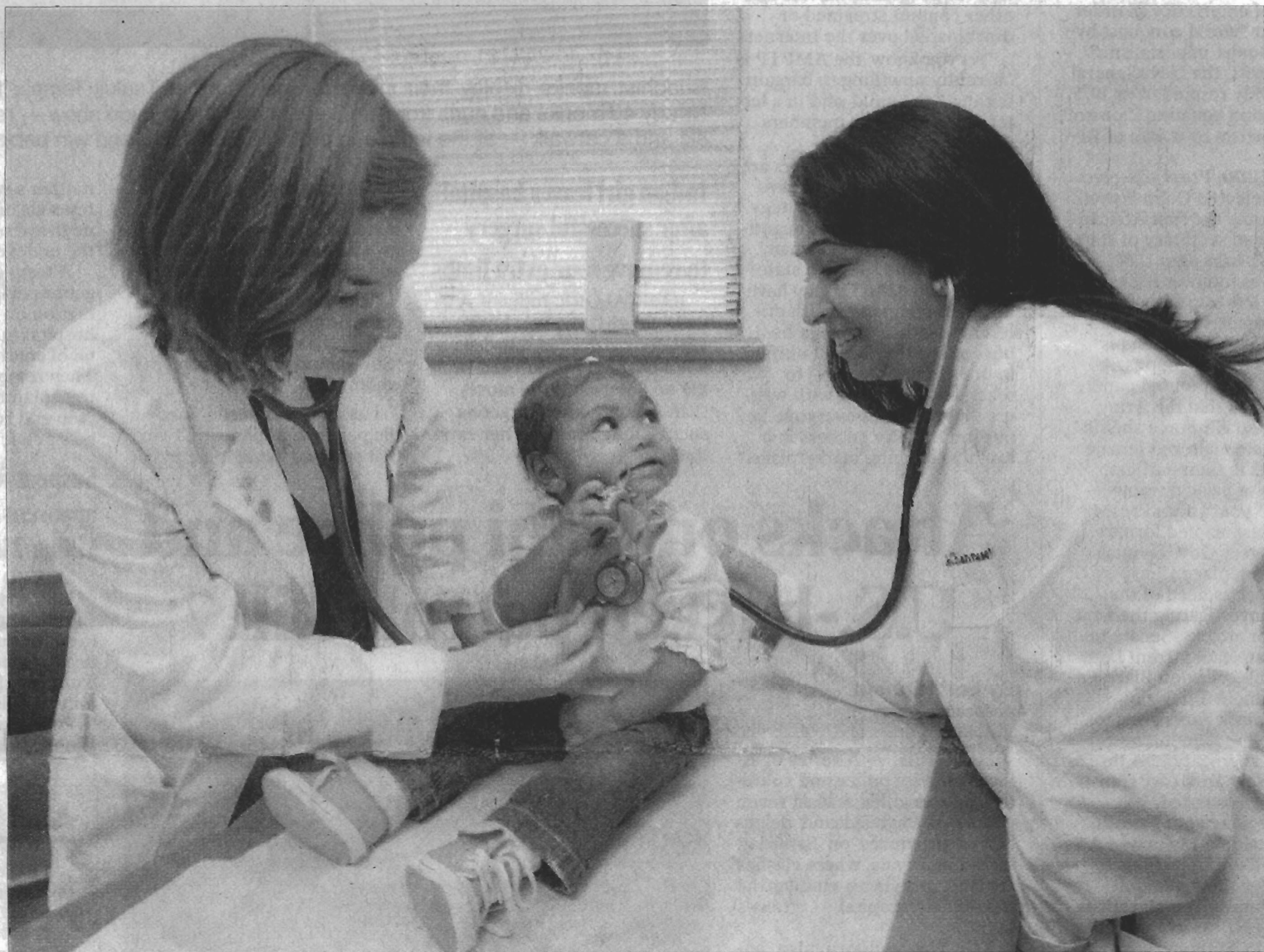


Meriden's CHC: A new model for health care?



Dave Zajac / Record-Journal

Medical student Jessie Donne, left, and Dr. Veena Channamsetty check the heartbeat of young patient Destiny Gatison, 10 months, at the Community Health Center in Meriden last week.

“The answer to this whole health-care problem might very well be the Community Health Centers.”

— Larry Kibner, former city councilor, chairman of the advisory board for the Community Health Center — and a CHC patient

By Andrew Perlot
Record-Journal staff

MERIDEN — Need an appointment with your doctor? You can probably see him today. Don't speak English? A battery of medically trained interpreters is waiting to translate for

Community Health Center

Number of patients served in the greater Meriden area: 8,000
Number of patients served in Connecticut: 70,000
Number of Languages that the over-the-phone medically trained in-

going to want to find places responsive to their needs. We offer so many other pieces at a very competitive price.”

Besides traditional medical and dental care, the facility also hosts a Walgreen's Pharmacy, which sells highly discounted medication, has trained psychiatrists and

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health so precarious, she said.

The work is hard — she sees far more patients than she would in a private practice — but it's also intellectually stimulating, and teaches her a set of skills that she would likely never have needed in her own medical office, she said. She's had to screen a house for lead, for instance, and has made house visits to try to identify what was causing the asthma attacks of a young girl.

She likes that her work is not static. With the electronic tablets that the staff uses, she can access information on the 70,000 patients that the organization treats in Connecticut. They see what treatments are working, and run tests based on the many categories on which they keep statistics. The staff regularly revisits their practices based on results.

"There's a misconception that this care is substandard," Olawiwola said. "We care for patients in regards to their reality instead of what's in some textbook. We do better than a lot of private practices."

Brady said that the organization's pay for medical personnel was competitive for the industry, but a bit on the lower end of the scale. All of the staff seemed motivated by the idea of helping the less fortunate, however.

Alicia Almeida, a dentist at the facility, said that she was happy with her pay. She had started off at the Community Health Center working two days a week while working three days at a private practice. But much of her job in private practice revolved around administering unnecessary cosmetic work, she said, so she recently switched full time to helping the poor.

The patients who come to see her often have had no regular teeth cleanings, and some come from countries where dental care is at a more primitive level. "A lot of them are like a train wreck," she said. "I see a lot of people who are mortified of their mouths. Some don't want to smile. I feel I'm doing good because I'm getting mouths healthy."

One man who needed extensive dental work gave her a card

those who need treatment but are uninsured, he said.

"There's a thinking out there that only poor people come here," he said. "We're actually being asked by several cities to open up new facilities. The answer to this whole healthcare problem might very well be the Community Health Centers."

Mark Masselli and a group of idealistic friends opened up the first Community Health Center in Middletown in 1972 when Masselli was 20. Their work was voluntary, they faced miles of red tape from the state Department of Public Health, and established providers regarded them disdainfully as an example of socialized medicine, Masselli said.

Today, Masselli serves as president and CEO of the organization, which has expanded to cover much of the state. Things have changed. Groups from out of state now come to try to observe and replicate the model elsewhere. In the next six years, he believes that Community Health Center may double in size.

"We believed that healthcare

is a right and not a privilege," Masselli said, stating a creed that adorns various walls and posters at his clinics.

He also believes in improving virtually everything about health care by taking a systematic approach based on data. In his Middletown office, he called up a spreadsheet with a few taps of his keyboard. "1,921 people have called today," he said. "They waited an average of 18 seconds to talk to a receptionist. They averaged two minutes and 11 seconds per call."

Realizing that people want treatment immediately, and that people are likely to miss appointments made more than a day in advance, Masselli decided to start getting patients to see doctors the same day they call. This greatly increased the efficiency of the office.

So that people don't have to wait long on the phone, a call to any of the centers will be rerouted to free receptionists in other locations capable of making appointments for any facility. In the Meriden facility, when a doctor prescribes medication, he notes it on his tablet and the

order is sent down to the Walgreen's Pharmacy for processing. The patient can pick up his pills on the way out.

Because the staff doesn't speak every language, every examination room is equipped with a speaker phone capable of calling a service of medically trained interpreters. Staff no longer has to rely on family members who may not speak much English themselves, sav-

ing time and decreasing misunderstanding.

Statistically speaking, Masselli said his organization meets or exceeds the results of even the prestigious Mayo Clinic based in Rochester, Minn.

Around 70 percent of the organization's funding in a given year comes from Medicaid, self-pay or private health insurance, Masselli said. The rest comes from grants from the federal and state governments, as well as private foundations.

Of course, like any medical facility, some patients aren't

happy. In the Meriden facility, several patients in the waiting room said they were very pleased with the service. But Dorchelle Roman of Meriden said the facility had canceled several appointments for her young daughter, and offered poor service. "I think this place sucks," she said.

Brady is the first to admit that there are always improvements to be made: "We're certainly not perfect."

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