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A Prescription for Caring

Doctor Treats District's Poor, Homeless With More Than Medicine

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It was a typical morning at a District health clinic for the homeless. And therein lies the tragedy.

Waiting in line to see A. Janell Goetcheus, family physician and advocate for the poor, was one patient with 10 illnesses, including anemia, hypertension, diabetes and a serious ulcer on his only foot. It would take weeks to address all his health needs.

Another patient, an emaciated 21-year-old man with AIDS, trembled in pain as he whispered that he had just left a hospital and planned to stay in a nearby emergency shelter.

Another man waited in tears, fearful that Goetcheus would tell him that he had not been cured of cancer two years earlier. His fear was justified.

"Sometimes I think people feel like I'm making it up," Goetcheus said of such routine clinic visits. "Sometimes I can't get people to hear how awful things are."

For 15 years, the 51-year-old medical director for the Health Care for the Homeless Project has dedicated her life to making people listen to her pleas

for better health care for the city's homeless. Last year, the project treated nearly 10,000 homeless men, women and children in shelters across the city.

This fall, the American Academy of Family Physicians honored Goetcheus as Family Doctor of the Year for her work with the poor. A colleague described her as "the right messenger at the right time" to promote the academy's goal of providing everyone with access to quality health care.

Over the years, Goetcheus, a soft-spoken woman who is uncomfortable talking about herself, has taken this message to other physicians who could provide time and resources for the poor. Now, a network of doctors is available to help with her project.

She also has taken the message to elected officials, offering wrenching testimony at government hearings on the homeless, stories of young men who have strokes because they cannot get treatment for high blood pressure, of the sick who are malnourished because they are too weak to walk to soup kitchens, and of the men who die in the streets.

See DOCTOR

Physician A. Janell Goetcheus examines Stanley Caston at Christ House, a care facility for the homeless.



Goetcheus talks with Christ House patient William Yelverton.

Doctor for Poor

But in her examining rooms, her message to the homeless patients is that the doctor who puts a hand on their shoulders is there to look after more than their physical ailments. In her they discover a social worker who asks whether they need housing assistance or warmer winter coats. They find a friend who is not reluctant to hug them, pray with them and learn from them. They find a personal advocate.

The 21-year-old AIDS patient in the clinic this day had been released from a hospital just hours earlier. She looked at the man, who could not sit or stand without assistance, and knew that he would never survive in a shelter.

Within minutes, Goetcheus had reached a friend in her vast network of resources and made arrangements for the man to return to a hospital.

"Many physicians volunteer to help the homeless, but Janelle is a crusader," said Tom Nees, president of the nonprofit Community of Hope, who has known Goetcheus for a decade. "You get a sense from her that . . . the real vocation is challenging the injustices."

Goetcheus planned it that way more than 30 years ago.

During her junior high school days in Muncie, Ind., her life centered on the United Methodist Church. She decided then that medical school would be good preparation for missionary work.

She was one of 11 women in a class of 200 in the Indiana University School of Medicine, and during that time she got a firsthand look at dev-

astating poverty and health needs during a three-month fellowship in Zaire.

The idea that the people most in need live overseas stayed with Goetcheus until she and her husband, Allen, a Methodist minister, decided to do missionary work in Pakistan. While waiting for visas, the couple visited Washington in 1976 and heard poor people talk about the difficulty of getting medical care right here.

The couple and their three children changed their plans and moved to Washington, and Goetcheus began working primarily with the poor in Adams-Morgan. During that time she founded Columbia Road Health Services and was one of the few physicians in town who responded to the calls of shelter providers throughout the city.

"She came whenever I called, and she treated the homeless as equals in a way that would calm down the most hostile and agitated of them," said David Nelson, who helps to coordinate health services at the Community for Creative Non-Violence's Northwest shelter, the city's largest.

Over the years, Nelson said he has seen Goetcheus cry over the conditions of some patients and approach tragedy after tragedy without becoming hardened.

Yet Goetcheus's actions often were spurred by frustrations, among them the small health problems she would see become major ones as homeless people returned to the streets after receiving treatment.

"A man would have an ulcer on one leg and eventually an amputation would be necessary when all that was needed was to have the person sit down and prop his leg up and get good nutrition," Goetcheus said.

Worse yet, the day after she treated a homeless man for frostbite, he was found frozen to death in a phone booth. Goetcheus was determined to change the situation. Soon afterward, she and a colleague stood in front of a vacant building on Columbia Road NW where homeless people sometimes slept on the steps, and they prayed that it could be used to better the conditions of the homeless.

Six years ago, that four-story building became Christ House, a 34-bed respite care facility for the homeless, after a friend of the Church of the Saviour donated \$2.2 million for the project. Goetcheus is medical director for the facility, which has treated more than 1,600 men since it opened.

Goetcheus, who believes it is important to be a part of the life of the homeless and not just do for them, lives with her husband on the top floor of the building along with other doctors, nurses and social workers. Her three grown children have moved away. John, 24, is in law school. Mark, 21, is working in a Chicago homeless shelter and Ann, 18, is studying to become a nurse.

Still, Goetcheus is discouraged by society's failure to acknowledge the suffering of the homeless and respond.

"I saw a lot of poverty in Zaire, but it was different," she said. "When you walk from bed to bed in the shelters here, you just see faces of despair and hopelessness. It is as though the hope has been yanked out of people. In Zaire, they still had hope."