

Student Sight Savers Program

The Eyes of the Community

John was reluctant to see a doctor about his eyes. He didn't trust doctors and besides, he had no health insurance. But the more he complained about his vision – that he couldn't see like he used to, especially at night – the more his wife pressured him.

So he stood in line at Lexington Market waiting for his turn for a glaucoma screening, watching a doctor and a group of medical students working. He didn't trust any of these strangers. The more mature looking doctor sat down with John and introduced himself as Dr. Sadri. Dr. Sadri took his time and explained to John in a friendly voice exactly what they were going to do. He asked John a few questions and then listened intently. John stared down into his large hands and answered only in monosyllabic grunts. Dr. Sadri took extra time and care in framing his questions and answers. After a few minutes, it was clear that the doctor seemed honest and genuinely concerned. John relaxed and began answering questions about his eyes and his health in more detail.

Dr. Sadri completed a patient history form with the assistance of a medical student, and then began the glaucoma screening. John's eyesight was compromised, but not by glaucoma, his eyes were old and he simply needed eyeglasses. John thanked Dr. Sadri and smiled at two of the students as he left. There was no charge and best of all, he thought, he wasn't going blind like he feared.

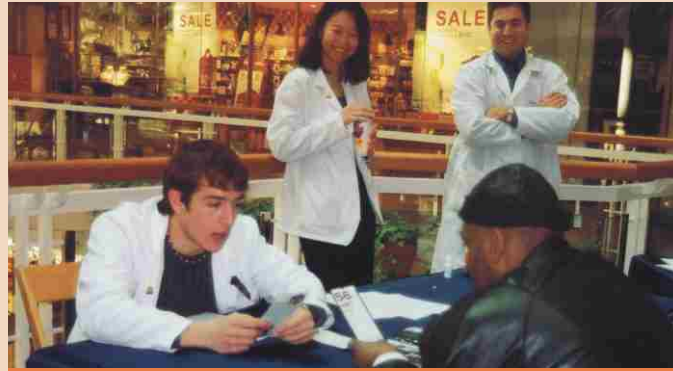
Student Organized and Led

Since July of 2001, the Student Sight Savers Program (SSSP) of the University of Maryland School of Medicine has screened close to 900 individuals for glaucoma in the Baltimore Metropolitan area. Upwards of 10% are suspect for glaucoma – the “sneak thief” of vision.

Started by Drs. Eve Higginbotham and Ehsan Sadri, the program's goal is to create awareness in the community of the prevalence and effects of glaucoma – and to save eyesight. “The program targets communities where residents do not have easy access to proper medical eye care and often cannot afford healthcare insurance,” says Dr. Sadri. There is a focus on the African-American and Hispanic communities because of the higher incidence of glaucoma in these populations.

The program is organized and led by students. It includes students and mentors, and has grown from three volunteers in 2001 to over 81 today. The free screenings operate on most Saturdays throughout the school year. Often community groups are involved in providing the sites and getting the word out to the neighborhood. “We take the greatest pride in those scenarios which we set up on our own,” says Dr. Sadri, “Without

any type of formal announcement, we appear at a popular shopping mall or the Lexington Market for example. In these places we have enormous success with the number of people who decide to have the free screening on the spur of the moment.”



Cindy Chan, M.D. and Ehsan Sadri, M.D. (background, from left), observe as a member of the Student Sight Savers Program works with a patient

Far Sighted Approach

Here is a farsighted community outreach program that has enormous benefits on both social and educational levels. The word is spreading about this insidious eye disease – the importance of catching it in the early stages, and aggressively treating it when necessary. “It is a beautiful thing for the School of Medicine to offer the community,” claims Dr. Sadri, “It tells our neighbors what we are all about.”

For students the benefits are many. They learn how to handle an eye screening, how to examine the eye, and they get a look at what a career in ophthalmology may be like.

However, the program is much more than another academic exercise on the way to a medical degree. It provides young students with real world experience. It pulls their noses out of those ponderous textbooks. It is an experience that is more about people than science, more about relationships than final grades.

Seeing Results

“The students love interacting with the public,” says Dr. Sadri. “They are so enthusiastic because they get a chance to see the results of their work.”

Students learn how to interact with patients on a personal level, how to establish rapport, how to make a patient feel comfortable, and how to gain trust. None of this can be learned from a book, yet it is an important facet of the practice of medicine. “I tell the students they must sit down and listen to the patients. Take time with patients to answer their questions and concerns, to allay any fears,” says Dr. Sadri. “As the students watch the more experienced doctors working with patients, they begin to assimilate these skills.”

The ultimate outcome is that the student is reminded, “oh yes, this is why I am studying to become a doctor.”

Funding and Follow-up Care

Funding for the SSSP was provided by the Friends of the Congressional Glaucoma Caucus Foundation. The Department of Ophthalmology in the School of Medicine received a \$50,000 grant to support its glaucoma screening efforts in the community. An additional grant of \$10,000 was subsequently provided.

A fundamental challenge of all community screening programs is follow-up care. Since most of the patients screened in the Student Sight Savers Program are low income and without health insurance, when a patient screens positive, money for follow-up care becomes an issue.

Anticipating this scenario, Dr. Sadri went back to the AMA and the Friends of the

Congressional Glaucoma Caucus Foundation to present his case. He pointed out that the program underscores one of the nagging weaknesses in our nation's health care system – the dramatic number of people who do not have health care insurance, and because of this, do not seek help. For the program to be truly successful, it must provide follow-up care at no cost. The foundation agreed and once again provided generous funding to handle this segment of the program.

“We make it as easy as possible for our patients to receive follow-up care,” says Dr. Sadri, “So that they will be encouraged, we bypass normal channels for receiving free health care, eliminate the bulk of the paperwork, and even help with rides to the clinic.”

A Vision Beyond the Horizon

This program has been so successful that its vision extends well beyond our community. Dr. Sadri and volunteers have inspired medical schools across the country to begin their own glaucoma screening community outreach programs. Today, that cause has been taken up in almost 30 other medical schools with the University of Maryland School of Medicine's program serving as the touchstone.

“We are delighted that our medical students are leading the effort to fight glaucoma nationwide, and that our program is serving as a model for many others,” says Dr. Sadri. It is a win-win situation. Communities benefit. Students benefit.

To learn more about the Student Sight Savers Program and other fantastic community outreach programs at the University of Maryland School of Medicine, contact the Development Office (410) 706-8503.