A Passion for Combating Health Disparities: Hepatitis B and the Hmong Community

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I vividly remember the first time I met Dan-Tam Phan-Hoang: it was at Hepatitis on the Hill a month ago, when we broke into constituent groups to discuss visits with our state's legislators.

I found the Minnesota table, plopped down next to Dan-Tam, and introduced myself. When I asked her how she felt about the upcoming visits, she said, "I'm feeling good so far! I spent most of last night doing research."

I looked down at my pre-assembled conference packet.

Research?

She promptly produced a detailed list of the Minnesota representatives' past legislative positions, stats from their congressional districts, relevant news articles, and other tidbits.

In that moment, I knew I would be touring the Hill with a rockstar. Not only does Dan-Tam work for Hep B Initiative-MN (HBI-MN), a partner organization of NVHR, she is HBI-MN.

As the program manager and sole HBI-MN staff member, Dan-Tam coordinates volunteers, outreach, marketing, testing, and linkage to care to raise awareness about viral hepatitis in underserved Minnesota communities.

The overarching Hep B Initiative (HBI-DC) began in DC to mobilize communities to prevent liver diseases caused by viral hepatitis among Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders and African immigrants. HBI-DC founder, Leslie Hsu Oh, lost her mother and brother to hepatitis B while in graduate school for public health. She then she moved to DC to found HBI-DC to educate at-risk and underserved communities and provide screening, vaccination, and linkage to care.

Dan-Tam worked for HBI-DC for two years before returning home to Minnesota. To her surprise, she found that no one was working in hepatitis B.

That didn't sit well with Dan-Tam, a driven young woman from a state where the largest groups of foreign-born residents include people from Laos, Somalia, Vietnam, Thailand, Burma, Cambodia,

and Ethiopia — areas where hepatitis B remains endemic.

Dan-Tam asked HBI-DC if she could start a Minnesota chapter, and in the fall of 2015, HBI-MN was born.

HBI-MN originated at a critical time in Minnesota's history. Minnesota's metropolitan area (the Twin Cities) has undergone massive demographic shifts in recent decades: its foreign-born population has tripled since 1990 and is currently increasing faster than the national average.

Minnesota is also home to the second-largest Hmong population in the U.S. (behind California) and the largest Hmong population in a metropolitan area.

As a result, Dan-Tam decided to begin building HBI-MN's community presence by focusing on the Hmong community.

The most recent surveillance data pinpoints HBV prevalence in the Hmong community at a staggering 18%. However, due to lack of surveillance data, these rates are likely gross underestimates.

Globally, hepatitis B is most often a result of vertical transmission from mother-to-child, yet stigma surrounding the disease causes many to associate it with sexual activity and drug use. Therefore, much of Dan-Tam's work in the Hmong community revolves around education, explaining that hepatitis B is also transmitted from mother-to-child, medical practices, or from sharing personal hygienic equipment (razors, toothbrushes, or nail clippers) with others.

Stigma has long been a sticking point for Dan-Tam, whose passion for public health and alleviating health disparities led her into the field of viral hepatitis.

"I've spoken with people in these communities who are affected by hepatitis B, but they won't come forward because of the stigma around it," she said. "I want to stand up for those who don't have a voice in these communities."

And that doesn't mean staying in just one community! In the months since HBI-MN began, Dan-Tam has begun to reach out to others in the Twin Cities. Tabling and providing education in supermarkets, clinics, and health fairs has already connected her to West African community leaders.

HBI-MN will have 2-4 events each month beginning in May, which happens to be Asian Pacific Heritage Awareness Month and Hepatitis Awareness Month. Dan-Tam plans to have weeklong events during May, including partnering with a community-based clinic to offer hepatitis C testing, a health fair in Hmong village, and more.

Not bad for someone who began HBI-MN last fall!

The existence of HBI-MN, from its modest beginnings to its impressive reach, highlights the

dedication of advocates like Dan-Tam who are committed to eliminating health disparities in communities disproportionately affected by hepatitis B and C.

Check out HBI-MN's website, Facebook, and Twitter to stay connected with their amazing work!

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