Hepatitis-C Testing with the United States Public Health Service

August 10, 2017 By Carleen McGuffey

My heart is full tonight as we wind down from a weekend of serving folks in Idabel Oklahoma with Hepatitis-C Testing and Resources. We have been partnering with www.ramusa.org for a couple years. Ram serves in poor, rural areas of America where often times Hepatitis-C is most prevalent. 1% of the general population is infected with Hepatitis-C, except for Baby Boomers, they are about 5 times more likely to have Hepatitis-C than the general population. That's about 1 in 33 Baby Boomers, and yet we find that this demographic is changing as the opioid epidemic takes root around our country. Everyday 142 people die from overdose.

When partnering with Remote Area Medical we show up, create a makeshift Hepatitis-C testing clinic and try to stay out of the way as the amazing Ram volunteers, core employees, Providers, and local community hosts convert High School gymnasiums and churches into a temporary medical clinic. Ram workers and volunteers come from all over the country to provide 100s of

patients top notch health care over the course of a weekend. It’s an amazing sight to behold, and we feel incredibly blessed for our children and ourselves to be a part of the healing and help that is being offered to some of Americas most vulnerable.

Ram partners with local Community Hosts in various cities. These hosts go out of their way to make us volunteers feel welcome. The local groups do what they can to feed us, facilitate security, connect Ram to local labs, Providers, and volunteers who do whatever is needed. It's an amazing collaboration of America's finest coming together to fulfill Rams Mission Statement "to prevent pain and alleviate suffering." When I first read that was RAMS mission statement it seemed like a confirmation for us to partner with them as our Short Mission Statement is " to relieve suffering in the Hepatitis-C Community".

I knew RAM was amazing, capable and talented, but this weekend I had the privilege of being offered assistance from the United States Public Health Service. Overseen by the Surgeon General, the U.S. Public Health Service Commissioned Corps is a diverse team of more than 6,700 highly qualified, public health professionals. Driven by a passion to serve the underserved, these men and women fill essential public health leadership and clinical service roles with the Nation's Federal Government agencies. The USPHS runs alot like the Military with much of the same structure, and discipline seen in our Military, they are in fact one of the 7 Uniformed Services of the United States (Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard, National Oceanic Atmospheric Agency, Public Health Service).

In the weeks leading up to this clinic in Idabel Oklahoma, I had heard that the USPHS was eager to partner with the person doing Hepatitis-C testing and that they were even going to provide me with a Pharmacist who has extensive experience with Hep-C. I figured she had dispensed a lot of Hepatitis-C medicine. I completely underestimated CDR Rebecca Geiger. She does more than dispense meds. She is one of the most passionate, and knowledgeable Hepatitis-C advocates I have ever met. She has never had the disease, which makes her heart to serve yet even more impressive and pure. CDR Rebecca Geiger was connected with Hepatitis-C when she was chosen to serve Hepatitis-C patients back when Interferon was the gold standard treatment. CDR Rebecca Geiger like anyone else who engages the Hepatitis-C community soon learned that there was a huge lack of resources, good information, funding, and links to care for those with the virus. Most people who see the disparities in Hepatitis-C care do what they can, but often become demoralized and burn out quickly. There just isn't alot of glory, money, credit, or other incentive to serve this forgotten community. The clients are often poor, underinsured, uninsured, sometimes addicted, or otherwise deemed unworthy of good healthcare. Perhaps it's this very thing that makes CDR Rebecca Geiger so passionate, the fact that hardly anyone cares about these people and yet they are people, worthy of life and love. She choked up when sharing the value of her patients and the worth of people who don't know their status. Her passion for this community is amazing and inspiring.

CDR Rebecca Geiger knows everything there is to know about Hepatitis-C. Not just the complicated chemical makeup of the medicines, or the details of the virus and how it slowly kills by attacking the liver. When CDR Rebecca Geiger took on Hepatitis-c as a Pharmacist she didn't stop at dispensing medicine, she dove into considering and capably addressing every aspect of this chronic illness, the stigma, obstacles, lack of funding, road blocks, politics, and shame associated with the disease.

In addition to CDR Rebecca Geigers amazing Hepatitis-C knowledge is an incredible and capable energy and drive to work hard. All of the folks who helped me this last weekend were incredible. James and I often pay people good money and yet have never found such passion and energy as the United States Public Health Service displayed. I kept asking my team if they wanted to take breaks or leave early as things slowed. Turns out I took the breaks and left early as I was left

standing around as they hopped to every single need.

Asking for a Hepatitis-C test can be embarrassing. Our crew was aware of this and as soon as a client entered our room they were greeted with warmth, welcome and excellent service. LCDR Jason Brown, CDR Rebecca Geiger and others treated every client like a VIP. The USPHS offered smiles, excellent information, and outstanding service with a very high level of professionalism. I wonder if the poor folks who attended this clinic have ever been served so generously with such sincere kindness and concern.

My wheels are turning as I consider how the USPS and CDR Rebecca Geiger, in particular, may be able to be the answer to effectively addressing the Hepatitis-C epidemic. Hepatitis-C is deadlier than all 60 infectious diseases combined including Aids, Zika, Tuberculosis, and Ebola. The USPHS is driven by a passion to serve the underserved, these men and women fill essential public health leadership and clinical service roles within several of our Nation’s Federal Government agencies. This may be the first time I have been happy to see my tax money at work, the compassion and excellent level of service was apparent. These people are exactly the kind of people needed to address the Hepatitis-C epedemic.

Thank you, Becca, and USPHS, I feel completely re-centered, inspired and encouraged to help more people with Hepatitis-C than ever. James and I sometimes feel demoralized and alone in this fight. We have faced more resistance than encouragement, so this weekend was an enormous boost for us. I literally feel like I was given enough inspiration to go another mile, work a little harder, serve a little more and save lives.

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