

Physicians seek to serve homeless

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He is also a member of the board of directors of the Coalition for the Homeless in Washington, D.C.

"The poorer you are is inversely proportional to the amount of disease you'll have," Greer told his audience.

In particular, the impoverished and the homeless have higher rates of substance abuse and malnutrition than the general population, Greer said, adding that they also suffer in greater numbers from such ailments as hypertension, tuberculosis, foot infections and dental decay.

Health-care workers who see these homeless people in emergency rooms and clinics are experiencing firsthand the societal breakdown that other citizens are only beginning to realize, he said.

"Society is very slow to change, but illnesses come upon us quickly," he said.

Today's homeless men and women, many of whom have fallen victim to the nation's struggling economy, lack

the money necessary to pay doctors' bills, the transportation to get to physicians' offices, and the preventive skills that would have kept them from having to go there in the first place, he said.

Sadly enough, Greer noted, he has personally seen that homelessness is on its way to becoming a family tradition in Miami. He recalled helping a pregnant, homeless woman deliver her child as cars drove across the overpass above her makeshift "home."

"As she was giving birth, I realized that I'm literally looking at the birth of a second generation of homelessness," he commented.

The remedy for treating the homeless is to meet them where they live — in the streets, beneath the highway overpasses, and at the shelters, he said.

Hospitals should explore sending physicians and other health-care workers out to such sights, Greer said, noting that the homeless population often appreciates such concern for their needs.

Hospitals should also not be afraid to chase corporate and private help for financial aid to combat the homeless' health problems, he remarked. Many private foundations are willing to donate funds for innovative approaches to solving the homelessness problem, he said.

Greer also urged his audience to tap local medical universities for student volunteers who are often eager for a chance to serve the poor.

Working with the homeless and the impoverished will open the eyes of health-care workers, Greer said, emphasizing that many medical personnel need to understand the hard knocks of street life.

"Never mix your schooling with your education," he joked.

On a more serious note, he noted that the poor and the homeless often lack the same outlook on life as do well-educated, middle- and upper-income citizens.

Referring to the children of homeless mothers, he asked rhetorically: "What



Erik Kunkel/Photo Intern

Dr. Joseph Fontana, who has been a volunteer with the program since it began in February, completes some paper work.

do you have as a reference when your teacher says, 'Draw a house?'"

Generally, health-care workers need to abandon preconceptions about the homeless, he said, urging his audience not to harshly judge drug-users and others who have lived different lifestyles.

Health-care workers must think about meeting the needs of the homeless in the most convenient manner as possible, he said. Homeless medical clinics, for example, should call for volunteer babysitters to watch the children of mothers who need time to learn about obtaining such assistance as Medicaid, he said.

He also pointed out that clinics for the homeless and the poor should use them as volunteers and staff people as much as possible. Such a policy allows the poor and homeless to take charge of their lives and to feel like they own the clinic, he said.

Noting that many audience members were Catholic, Greer concluded by prodding them to live out their faith by seeing Jesus in the homeless.

"How can you worship a homeless man on Sunday, and then ignore one on Monday?" he said rhetorically.

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Between patient visits, Dr. Papa (left) takes a moment to talk with James Gordon Belkirc. The program is designed to prevent situations in which homeless people might be forced to visit emergency rooms for basic medical care. Some of the supplies used in the program have been donated by pharmaceutical companies.

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