Nova Southeastern students learn value of community nursing

BY JL WATSON
Lee Memorial Health System

Along with patient care and charting, a group of Nova Southeastern University students are learning about the challenges of finding health care on a limited budget.

The six students, who will graduate in December, spent eight weeks developing ways to connect low-income Southwest Florida residents with health care services. Karen Krieger, director of community affairs for Lee Memorial Health System, helped develop the program.

"This program was designed to help them learn about needs in the community, but they helped us by bringing us new ideas," Ms. Krieger says.

The students developed a chart of area services that are available at free or reduced costs, including area clinics and community health centers. They also completed rotations in Lee Memorial Health System hospitals to gain experience with patients from all walks of life.

"This has been an awesome experience," says student Amber Andrews. "We have services available. The big challenge is how do we help the underserved community get those services?"

The students volunteered their time at a health fair held at Nations Association Charities. Each student was assigned to a local family, and helped them navigate the health services questionnaire. Because of their help, a diabetic man received the urgent help he needed and many families learned about health conditions ranging from high blood pressure to the effects of obesity. The goal is to get patients to use local services for preventive care and to maintain regular health check-ups instead of waiting for an emergency situation that requires a visit to a hospital.

Student Judeline Janpierre says she learned first-hand how expensive health care can be and how she could have avoided getting a large bill.

"One time, I was a patient in a hospital and I shouldn't have been," she says.

Ms. Janpierre started experiencing severe stomach pains, and instead of seeking more affordable treatment at a local clinic, she went to a local hospital emergency department.

"Really, the hospital has bigger issues to take care of and when someone like me comes in, it affects the whole hospital," she says. "The people working there have bigger issues, like patients with a stroke or heart attack, who need their attention."

Ms. Janpierre was treated and released, but received a large bill following her experience. She wants to save someone else the expense, and to direct them to community resources, like the Lee Physician Group United Way Houses in Dunbar and North Fort Myers. Both offer medical services on a sliding payment scale.

The students were part of the pilot program, and one that Nova Southeastern nursing instructor Terry Ogilby, R.N., hopes is the start of something permanent.

"We wanted to expose the students to community health because it's the best way we can make an impact," she says. "It's getting the word out there about services for people who may not otherwise know there is care available."

For some of the students, the experience shaped their goals for the start of their nursing career. One plans to seek employment in New York, one is open to the idea of going anywhere, and some want to stay in Southwest Florida.

Because of this experience, Ms. Andrews says she has found her calling in community nursing.

"When a patient comes in, it's not just 'check, check, check,'" she says. "It's thinking about this person when they go home and how they are going to get the care and services they need."