Importance of Maintaining Local Relationships in Student-Run Clinics: A tuberculosis testing perspective

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Introduction

An effective tuberculosis program in a city with a high incidence rate requires a large amount of funding for supplies, confirmatory testing for tuberculin skin test (TST) positive patients, and community awareness about the importance of TB screening. The Tulane University School of Medicine (TUSOM) Student-Run TB Program operates out of five New Orleans homeless shelters and drug rehabilitation centers, and have screened more than 2,500 individuals since 2013. The Wetmore TB Clinic, which serves the Louisiana Department of Health, provides tuberculosis advising, testing, and treatment to those who seek it. Together, these programs have provided much-needed, appropriate and preventive tuberculosis care to underserved and at-risk New Orleans populations.

TUSOM Student-Run TB Program

Tuberculin Skin Testing and readings are performed completely by medical students. The five sites are:

- New Orleans Mission – Homeless Shelter
- Oranam Inn – Homeless Shelter
- Bridge House/Grace House – Drug Rehabilitation Center
- Bethel Colony South – Drug Rehabilitation Center
- First Presbyterian – Homeless Shelter

Students screen individuals using the tuberculin skin test. People with negative tests are cleared for six months, whereas people with positive tests who show active symptoms are directed to the emergency department. Others with positive tests, but who do not have any active symptoms, along with those who have previously positive tests are referred to Wetmore Clinic for follow-up testing. On average, about five individuals are referred to Wetmore Clinic every month across all five sites.

Wetmore Clinic

The Wetmore TB Clinic, under the Louisiana Department of Health, provides TB services for those living in New Orleans. TB services include chest X-rays, T Spot testing, nurse consultation, and treatment for positive tests. The clinic is staffed by Tulane and LSU doctors. Of note is Dr. Jazir Ali, who has been invaluable to the TUSOM student-run program with his expertise and guidance. It is important to highlight that Wetmore Clinic provides ALL of confirmatory testing for latent TB, assets that we, as students, do not have readily available.

Overcoming Obstacles

Over the past year, we encountered a variety of obstacles. We have worked extensively with Wetmore Clinic to resolve the matters. Two notable issues that came up were:

1. Shortage of Tuberculin – Previously, the student-run program received donations of tuberculin from Wetmore Clinic. However, due to changes in Wetmore’s financial structure, this was no longer allowed. Thus, we applied for a grant through the Wetmore Foundation to continue our services, obtaining $11,500 to buy enough tuberculin for an entire year and flu shots for a portion of the regular “flu season” (October through March). During the shortage, we relied on a couple other community partners, Healthcare for the Homeless and Bridge House, to continue providing free TB testing services for the populations we work with. As a result of this grant, we were also successful in opening up a new TB testing location for the homeless at First Presbyterian Church.

2. Lack of Follow-Up – Overall, the follow-up rate of people returning for their test results across all five of our testing sites is about 70%. Retention rates at Wetmore Clinic are even lower. We acknowledge that we do not know if all the TST-positive patients we refer to Wetmore show up for follow-up testing. It is difficult to track down the patients we need to monitor because the population we work with is so transient. This is a long-term project that we envision working collaboratively on with Wetmore Clinic, directors of the homeless and rehabilitation centers, and officials at the Louisiana Department of Health.

Future Goals

There are many goals we hope to accomplish for the TUSOM Student-Run TB Program. These include:

- Maintaining a steady supply of tuberculin
- Providing bus tokens or vehicular transport for PPD-positive patients (who show no active symptoms of TB) to make a visit to Wetmore Clinic
- Improving our secure Electronic Health Record system and perhaps linking it in with the Wetmore Clinic’s electronic records
- “Closing the Loop” – establishing methods for improving follow-up rates at both testing sites and Wetmore Clinic
- Instituting a TB screening system that reduces tuberculin waste by focusing on questionnaire-based screening for those at lowest risk

As can be seen, many of these activities require that we maintain a healthy relationship with Wetmore Clinic. Furthermore, to fully accomplish our goals of “closing the loop” and a questionnaire-based screening system, we must also work alongside the Louisiana Department of Health and all of our testing sites to implement any plans in the safest manner possible for the general public. The expertise of doctors and public health professionals is key to successfully carrying out our goals.

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