Hepatitis A (HAV) is a liver disease that spreads via direct contact with an infected person or contaminated food and drink. This disease and its potential complications disproportionately affect homeless persons and drug users. Emergence of HAV outbreaks have been recently reported around the country. Most notably, San Diego declared a local health emergency that resulted in 587 cases and 20 deaths, many of whom were homeless. This prompted the Louisiana Department of Health to issue HAV/HBV combination vaccines and partner with the Tulane University School of Medicine to administer these vaccines.

Since the incident in San Diego, 16 states have declared outbreaks of HAV. Louisiana was recently forced to do so in December 2018. As of publication, there were 58 reported cases, 55 of which were linked to this outbreak. The majority of these cases were reported in northern Louisiana.

A choice was made to administer vaccines at Tulane student-run clinics in homeless shelters and drug rehabilitation centers to target the most high-risk populations. At the start of each shift, a Tulane medical student speaks about Hepatitis A, the recent outbreaks, and the free vaccinations available. Patients who are interested then read the CDC-provided handouts on Hepatitis A and B, fill out a data collection form about their risk factors, and complete required consent forms. Finally, patients are re-screened for pertinent allergies, asked if they have any questions, and are given a TwinRix combination Hepatitis A/B vaccination by a trained medical student. This initiative has been approved by the Tulane Institutional Review Board.

This process has re-affirmed the importance of patient education and empowerment. When patients are encouraged to make their own informed decisions, they are much more willing to be vaccinated. The hope is to apply this model of patient education to other student-run clinic initiatives at Tulane. With the continued interest for vaccinations in the community and the growing number of confirmed cases of HAV in Louisiana, the need for this program is clear.

In addition, to ensure patients are receiving standard of care, it is important for medical students to be aware of epidemics and other national health trends that can potentially negatively affect their patients, and then take action to address these issues accordingly. The importance of this is magnified for student-run clinics, which often care for underserved patient populations who are at higher risk of contracting contagious diseases and having subsequent complications. Clinical services must be adapted accordingly in order to provide the most effective care for patients.