

ADVANCE FOR NURSES

Bridge of Trust Nurses at Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers help bring Western medicine to Chinese-speaking patients.

By Kathleen A. Waton

Nurses at Saint Vincent Catholic Medical Centers in Manhattan have been dedicated to serving the Chinese-speaking community for more than 30 years.

In 1976, St. Vincent's Hospital established a primary care outpatient clinic on Elizabeth Street in the heart of Chinatown. All staff members in the clinic are bilingual, and many employees are trilingual to handle 30,000 annual visits from a population that is almost totally Chinese-speaking. Many of the clinic's patients are recent immigrants who do not speak any English.

Esther Wang, BS, RN, who was born in Hong Kong, has worked at St. Vincent's Chinatown Health Services for 18 years, reaching out to the community at health fairs and senior citizen centers, and in Head Start and day care programs.

A 24-hour Chinese telephone hotline assists patients. "We also are frequent guests on a Chinese-language radio show in Chinatown," Wang said. "Sometimes we are on the phone-in program to answer [topical] questions from the audience."

Relationships developed with other primary care facilities and providers in Chinatown facilitate referring patients who require specialty care to the O'Toole Outpatient Services across the street from St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan on 12th Street in Greenwich Village.

At this larger clinic, serving approximately 200 patients daily, bilingual Chinese RNs work in the medical subspecialties unit, the surgical and surgical subspecialty units and the ob high-risk unit. Chinese-speaking clerical staff, technicians and two full-time Chinese interpreters help.

At Home in Hospital

In 2006, eight beds on a 26-bed unit, Coleman 15 East, were dedicated and designed for Chinese patients and extended to other rooms to meet the increase in admission of Chinese patients. Designed in accordance with the principles of feng shui to ensure the positive flow of ch'i (vital energies), the unit provides an ambiance that makes Chinese-speaking patients feel safe and at home.

Signs and information cards are posted in Chinese. Chinese paintings decorate the walls and Chinese newspapers and television shows and Chinese food selections are available. The patient lounge also includes a ping pong table.

And when it comes to really feeling safe and secure when patients are not feeling well, it helps to have someone like Eva Nip, RN, near.

"Since I'm Chinese, I can understand the culture and know what they need," said the Hong Kong native. Chinese-speaking patients account for approximately 10 percent of the inpatient population.



ST. VINCENT'S TEAM: St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan healthcare team includes (seated, from left) Vera Tong, BSN, RN, staff nurse; Barbara Choy, MSA, RN, CCRN, nurse manager; Miriam Carasa, EdD, RN, NE-BC, chief nursing officer; Rory Sweeney McGovern, EdD, RN, administrator of nursing education and practice; (standing) Evril Vicary, BS, RN, nurse manager; Esther Wang, BS, RN, staff nurse; Angela Edwards, MA, RN-BC, director of nursing; Frances L. Wong, LCSW, ADS, director of Asian services; Mary Gribbin, MSN, RN, director of nursing ambulatory care; and Faith Zhao, MD. *photo by John Ciuppa*

"The hospital had a good relationship with community leaders in Chinatown," said Evril Vicary, BS, RN, nurse manager for Coleman 15 East. "In response to the leaders' requests and to meet Chinese patient needs and make them feel more comfortable, they decided to open the unit."

Doctors & Nurses

The nurses' efforts are complemented by a number of Chinese physicians, once dispersed throughout the hospital and now consolidated on the Chinese inpatient unit. There are two Chinese attending physicians - one who speaks Mandarin and one who speaks both Cantonese and Mandarin. An oncology physician also is Chinese. Plus, there is a Chinese-speaking hospitalist.

"Some of the community primary care providers are more comfortable sending their patients to St. Vincent's, knowing after hospitalization, the patients will return to their care," said Mary Gribbin, MSN, MBA, RN, director of nursing for ambulatory care. "When they meet the Chinese-speaking hospitalist, they feel the trust. The hospital has worked to build that relationship with not just each individual patient, but to maintain trust with the community leaders."

Support for Chinese patients is part of a larger cultural competence program at St. Vincent's. Every new employee participates in the program which covers many cultures, including Chinese, the largest minority population the hospital serves.

"We try to be a safety net for the healthcare of the Chinese," said Gribbin about the primarily Medicaid population.

Recognizing there are many differences within the Chinese-speaking population, Gribbin added: "[Patients] come from a lot of different regions in China and with different educational levels. If they come from a city like Beijing, they may come with certain knowledge of Western practices, but patients from a rural area like Fuzhou, for instance, may have less formal education and may not even read Chinese. It's much more of a challenge to deal with those patients."

Despite all the dialects in China, there is only one written language. "But the concern is," Gribbin said, "can the patients read? It depends on their education."

Continuity of Care

A Chinese initiatives department helps provide continuity of care for this population, providing Chinese-speaking volunteers, interpreters and translators to anticipate and resolve any problems between and within outpatient and inpatient facilities and in the home.

A Living at Home program of Chinese providers, nurses and aides is "very helpful," according to Wang, to help Chinese-speaking elders remain at home and near their families.

In the hospital, troubleshooting began in the design of Coleman 15 East. Numerology, the study of numbers, plays an important role in Chinese culture. Therefore, all rooms on the unit were changed to the alphabet, starting with C15A, since, for instance, the number 4 means death.

This past year, 2008 - the Year of the Golden Pig - was a good year for babies and St. Vincent's Hospital Manhattan saw an increase in births.

"Eight is a good number for Chinese," Wang said, "so we gave money in a red envelope, which means lucky money, to babies born on Aug. 8, 2008."

New mothers find comfort in eating a combination of ginger, pig's feet and vinegar, Wang said. Chinese don't like to eat or drink anything cold when they are sick so congee (rice porridge) is popular with the patient population in general.

"We eat a lot of [congee] or just plain rice, but especially when we are sick," said Nip, who admits she likes the soupy rice, too. "I think congee is very comforting, and a lot of our Chinese patients request it. Sometimes we just automatically order it as part of the Chinese diet option on the computer."

Culturally Sensitive

Being sensitive to cultural differences means looking out for staff, as well as patients. The Chinatown clinic is always closed on the Chinese New Year, Gribbin said. "It's a day of being with family, like Thanksgiving in the U.S."

Family plays a strong role in helping patients heal. Adult children, educated in the U.S., "make a lot of decisions on behalf of their parents," Nip said "because they speak [Chinese]. In Chinese culture, we are very close as a family. We make decisions together, so parents rely on their children and the children are usually very helpful and supportive."

When a new baby is on the way, usually grandparents take care of the baby and the mother. "We encourage them to come together," to the clinic, Wang said, "so they can participate in discussions and can understand our treatment."

An express van, driven by a Chinese-speaking driver following a schedule posted in Chinese, provides free shuttle service between Chinatown and the main hospital, the O'Toole Clinic and St. Vincent's Comprehensive Cancer Center in Greenwich Village.

Changing World

Older grandparents who care for children while their parents work require ongoing nutritional education.

"We're finding the little kids want to eat at McDonalds," Gribbin said. "Consequently, we're noticing an increasing trend in childhood obesity. The Chinese diet traditionally favors more rice, fruit and vegetables. It takes more education to help them choose healthier foods in the Western diet. We see a prevalence of hepatitis B and TB with this patient population, as well as premenopausal breast cancer and stomach cancer."

Smoking is a problem with the older men, Gribbin said, "especially recent immigrants. You'll see it in Chinatown when you walk down the street. This is not as great a concern with teenagers or women."

Eastern herbs may counteract Western medicine. "Our nurses and providers must spend time investigating and explaining to patients that this combination may be harmful," Gribbin said.

Building Bonds

Issues of shame and fear of addiction may complicate pain management.

"A lot of Chinese patients are not really expressing [pain] fully," Nip said. "They either have a very high pain tolerance or they are afraid to ask people for medicine. They won't express it to their family either. We just have to teach them it is OK to express pain, and pain is not good for the body and we can [give them] something for it."

Wang acknowledged building a good relationship with [Chinese-speaking patients] creates trust and encourages patients to "talk about their concern and pain after a few visits."

The dedication that nurses and others at SVCMC show in caring for their Chinese-speaking population promotes patient satisfaction. When Chinese-speaking patients move to other parts of the U.S., Wang sees many of them return on a weekend to the clinic in Chinatown.

"Most of our patients are relieved someone understands them and knows the language," Nip said.

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