



Modern Physician

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers [here](#) or use the "Reprints" link that appears next to any article. Visit modernphysician.com/reprints for additional information. [Back to article](#).

Article published April 7, 2008

Volunteer clinic network turns focus on patients

By Barbara Kirchheimer

Posted: April 7, 2008 - 5:59 am EDT

As the leading Democratic presidential contenders duke it out over whether it is possible or even desirable to require all Americans to have health insurance, it might seem an uncertain time to be in the business of operating free health clinics for the uninsured.

But those involved in Volunteers in Medicine, a national not-for-profit network of health clinics staffed largely by volunteer retired physicians, do not see their organization—or the need for it—fading away anytime soon.

"If all of the uninsured were all of a sudden insured, there isn't anywhere near the capacity in the current system to take care of everybody," says Amy Hamlin, executive director of Volunteers in Medicine, which is based in Burlington, Vt. "The reality is there will always be people who fall through the cracks, who can't make it, or whatever the proposed system will be, won't be able to access it. Because of that, these clinics will always be needed."

The organization, which has a staff of several consultants, helps local individuals and communities develop free medical clinics, each of which becomes an independent not-for-profit business. The national organization, largely funded by McNeil Consumer & Specialty Pharmaceuticals (the makers of Tylenol, among other drugs), provides the startup clinics with consulting services and networking opportunities, but the clinics each handle their own fundraising and staffing locally. In 1997, there were nine VIM clinics. Today there are 61 in 20 states, and Hamlin says she expects that number to continue to rise.

"We estimate there are over a quarter of a million retired doctors in this country," she says, with many more baby boomers entering that category each year.

Many physicians, especially those at or near retirement, relish an opportunity to practice in an environment that's all about caring for patients, she says. No money changes hands in the VIM clinics, there are no health insurance forms to fill out, and there are no patient-visit quotas to meet. "It's about practicing medicine in a way that they were trained and in a way that is very satisfying for them," she says. "I think that's what brings them out."



Eugene Cheslock, M.D.

Echoing that sentiment is Eugene Cheslock, M.D., who decided to start up a VIM clinic in Red Bank, N.J., after reading an [article](#) about the network's flagship clinic in Hilton Head, S.C. (*Modern Physician*, Oct. 1, 2002). A retired member of an oncology and hematology practice who now serves as the unpaid president of the health center and its board, Cheslock says his involvement and the success of what was to become the Parker Family Health Center in Red Bank was partly providence and partly the generosity of other community members.

"People from the community stepped in who anticipated a need for understanding the business side of running this thing," Cheslock says.

One person donated the land for the clinic, somebody else volunteered to build the building, and physician acquaintances began to volunteer their time. The center's treasurer is a chief financial officer of a real estate company by day, and an accounting firm donates its time to help oversee the books. And then there's rock star Jon Bon Jovi, who grew up nearby and has made the clinic one of his ongoing charitable priorities, helping raise \$600,000 at one benefit concert in October 2007.

Since its opening in July 2000 in a refitted trailer, the health center has grown to have about 8,000 patients and has exceeded 50,000 patient visits. It now operates out of a permanent building and has a 2008 budget of \$805,000, some eight paid employees and more than 80 volunteer physicians and other healthcare staffers, Cheslock says.

"It's a very efficient model," he says. "Our budget is bare-bones, and yet the medicine is superb for what we're able to provide." The high quality care is made possible by the volunteers, he says.

One of those physician volunteers is Zaven Ayanian, M.D., a retired internist and fellow of the American College of Physicians who volunteers at the Parker clinic once a week.

A former member of a small group practice, Ayanian retired in 1998 and got involved because he knew Cheslock. The son of two Armenian parents who immigrated to the U.S. from Turkey, Ayanian was brought up believing in the idea of giving something back to his community. But he also says he benefits personally from his volunteer work at the clinic.

"I find it intellectually stimulating," he says. "It keeps me from experiencing a rapid erosion of my training and knowledge over many, many years."

Cheslock says recruiting volunteer physicians is "not a piece of cake" because of changes within the profession.

Younger doctors' fees are often dictated by insurance companies, and they emerge from medical school with a large cloud of debt over their heads, not to mention onerous malpractice premiums. Their long hours and financial burdens have turned medicine into a more mercenary profession than it used to be, one much less conducive to volunteerism, he says.

But calling his job at the Parker health center "a dream fulfilled," Cheslock urges his fellow physicians to consider either starting a VIM clinic or volunteering at one.

"I would embolden them to think big, and think about doing it, because they might be surprised by the response and the inherent spirit in so many individuals in medicine who have a similar dream but somehow get derailed from pursuing it," Cheslock says. "If accomplished, one thing is ensured, that they will love it and they will get more satisfaction from it than anything else they have done."

Barbara Kirchheimer, a former Modern Healthcare news editor and reporter, is a freelance writer based in Highland Park, Ill. Contact Kirchheimer at bkirchh@sbcglobal.net.

Comment on today's news or other matters. Submit your letter to *Modern Physician* at moddoc@crain.com. Submissions must include name, title, affiliation, city and state. *Modern Physician* reserves the right to edit all submissions.

Modern Physician is the "go-to" business publication for physician executives, leaders and entrepreneurs. Poised to guide the future of healthcare, physician leaders rely on *Modern Physician* for the news, issues and trends that impact healthcare.

For more physician news, visit <http://www.ModernPhysician.com>.