

Workers help navigate the medical maze

Community health workers lead the way for patients in complex, confusing world.

By Richard A. Marini

rmarini@express-news.net

Updated 11:34 a.m. Friday, July 8, 2011

It promises to be a busy day for Guadalupe Cornejo, who on this occasion is working at the Cancer Therapy & Research Center.

At her first stop, the community health worker introduces herself to a patient being treated for gastrointestinal cancer. She shows him some educational materials developed by Lance Armstrong's Livestrong Foundation and explains how they can be used to organize his records and find answers to medical questions.

But when the CHW asks if there's anything else she can do for him, he says he could use some financial help. After rent and taxes, he has barely \$100 a month to live on.

Cornejo, whose job it is to find just this sort of help, says there's plenty of medical-related assistance available — transportation vouchers, help paying for his pain meds — but finding money for basic living expenses is another matter.

As a CHW, it's Cornejo's job to help patients navigate the complex and often confusing world of high-stakes cancer care.

She answers questions, helps patients make appointments and apply for services and, when necessary, acts as a battering ram to push through the often-discouraging medical bureaucracy.

Sometimes, however, she's there just to hold a patient's hand.

Ramona Robledo has cancer of the liver and the pancreas, but what weighs on her the most is the recent death of her grandson Julio, who died three days shy of his fourth birthday.

"He was born premature and I stayed with him in the hospital for three months," Robledo, 47, says through the tears streaming down her cheeks. "When he died, I stopped my treatments. I wanted to go with him; I loved him so much."

Through this dark time, Robledo says, Cornejo stayed in touch, calling to ask if she needed anything and gently urging her to resume treatment.

"I love Guadalupe," says Robledo, who is back in therapy. "She told me I have to be strong for my daughter, so I have to take care of myself."

The roots of today's community health worker stretch back to the 1950s when, in northern Mexico and the Texas border region, lay people trained in good health practices were known as *promotoras de salud*.

"They went to places where there weren't many health professionals and talked to people about the importance of clean drinking water, breast feeding and other beneficial practices," explains Fernando Martinez, assistant professor at Northwest Vista College and head of the school's community health worker program.

In the mid-'90s, Christus Santa Rosa Health System began training its own community health workers, sometimes called patient navigators. Soon after, the CHW certification program became Northwest Vista's first academic curriculum.

The state of Texas certifies community health workers and, in addition to Northwest Vista, there are 15 schools and other medical organizations where students can take classes needed to earn certification.

A full-time student at the school can earn the CHW state certificate in as little as 5½ months, and graduates can expect salaries ranging from \$11 per hour at small community health organizations to \$17-\$18 per hour at established medical centers such as Christus Santa Rosa and CTRC, according to Martinez.

Those who go on to earn an associate's degree can make more, he says.

Like Cornejo, CHW certificate holders can work with patients undergoing treatment, or they can follow the traditional path and do community outreach. Other specialties include mental health, case management, family assistance and others.

"We graduate 40 to 45 students annually, and there's a growing need for community health workers," Martinez says.

Cornejo's job is funded in part by grants from the National Cancer Institute's Redes en Acción (Networks in Action) and Livestrong. The grants also are funding other CHWs in cities such as Miami, New York and San Diego, Calif., with large Hispanic populations.

"Research has shown that this population is more likely to fall through the cracks when it comes to cancer care," says Sandra San Miguel de Majors, a researcher-instructor at the University of Texas Health Science Center and program coordinator.

Preliminary figures show that, during the first eight months of the Redes en Acción/Livestrong partnership, the program's CHWs served 920 patients.

During the recently concluded 82nd Texas Legislature, House Bill 2610 directed the state's Health and Human Services Commission to determine if a statewide community-based health navigator program can be established and, if so, to train and certify navigators and maintain a list of certified navigators on its website.

The bill was passed and was signed by Gov. Rick Perry, and advocates say it is a step toward having CHW services paid for through Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program.

"Right now, their services are billable as part of a team of providers, but we'd like to see separate billing," Martinez says.

In the meantime, Cornejo continues calling various charitable foundations, looking to find help for her client.

"Finding money not related to treatment is harder than ever in this economy," she says later. "But I'll keep looking and see what I can do."

As originally published, this story contained an error.