

CURING PHYSICAL ILLS AND POVERTY TOO

By Elise Patkotak

Published: Anchorage Daily News; December 12, 2007

I'm not exactly the Christmas type. In fact, there are some who say I should not be allowed in polite company during this festive period. Personally, I find so many people running around with silly grins on their faces wishing everyone a happy holiday somewhat creepy. It's like they've all been brainwashed and then suddenly, on Jan. 2, the posthypnotic suggestion wears off and everyone goes back to avoiding eye contact with their fellow human beings when not actively scowling at them for some imagined slight.

So I am amazed that this column is going to cover a topic that should contribute to everyone's good spirits for the season. It's about a group of people who have made a commitment to make this world a little better for those who maybe don't always have it so easy. It's about medical professionals in this town -- doctors, nurses, pharmacists, physical therapists -- who are part of a group called Anchorage Project Access.

Maybe you already know about them. Maybe I only just heard the news because I'm one of the lucky few with health insurance.

I learned about the group during a visit to my doctor, K.C. Kaltenborn. He is a member of this organization. Finding that out just confirmed my initial feeling that he was a caring and honorable man. I had an appointment with him the day after last week's column appeared in which I bemoaned the fact that going to jail is the only way some people will ever have access to health care because they make too much for Medicaid but not enough for private health insurance. They are the working poor who want to pay their own way but find the cost of health care is beyond the means of all but the richest or the insured among us.

My doc gave me a newsletter from this group and said, "Some of us decided to do something about the people you wrote about in your column yesterday." Suddenly the holiday season made more sense to me than it has in a long time.

Anchorage Project Access is modeled after groups in other parts of the country. Its mission statement reads, "To increase access to health care for low income uninsured members of our community by using a volunteer network of providers working in a coordinated fashion to create a compassionate, respectful, equitable, accountable and efficient program of necessary services for those in need." In simple vernacular, it's a group of health care providers wanting to do something for people who don't have it so good. It's clear that these providers take seriously their commitment to our community's health and don't feel access to health care should be limited to a certain privileged few. Mostly though, it tells me that compassion and caring are not dead virtues in the medical profession. And that's good news for all of us.

As I looked through the list of groups participating in this project, I was amazed at the depth and breadth of involvement from our community. Groups as diverse as the Denali Commission, the Rasmuson Foundation, and Carrs/Safeway are listed as funders or in-kind donors. There is not a medical specialty or need not covered by the participating providers. And eligibility is ludicrously simple for anyone used to dealing with government eligibility requirements. You have to live in Anchorage, not have medical insurance, have a medical problem and have a gross household income at 200 per cent or less of the federal poverty level.

When I was growing up, our family doctor was pretty much a god. No matter how sick you were, when Dr. DiNick came down the hallway to your bedroom (yes, I'm so old I am talking about the days when doctors did home visits), you heard his booming voice and laugh and immediately knew you'd be better. And if your parents couldn't pay right away, well, that could be worked out. It was not an impediment to getting the help you needed to get better.

I thought that kind of doctors had gone the way of television knobs and rotary dials. But they apparently haven't. There are myriad health care providers in our community donating their skill and care to those who need it but can't afford it. These people can't take care of the health care needs of the whole world or even our whole state. But they do what they can, one patient at a time, to make the world here in the Anchorage Bowl a little better place for everyone, all year round.

And if that's not the spirit of this season, then I don't know what is.

This article is protected by copyright and should not be printed or distributed for anything except personal use. For information on reprinting this article or placing it on your Web site, please contact the Daily News marketing department at (907) 257-4429 or marketing@adn.com.