RotaCare El Paso:
A Medical Student-Run Free Clinic Serving El Paso

Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso physicians, medical students, and graduate students join community physicians, UT El Paso students, social workers, and other volunteers to care for El Paso’s most vulnerable residents under the direction of Dr. Richard McCallum.
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By Malini Riddle, Natalie Satterfield, Kristopher Van Huss, and Dr. Richard McCallum

What is RotaCare?
The RotaCare clinic opened in September of 2014, honoring the 100th anniversary of the El Paso Rotary Club. The clinic was built on the grounds of the San Pablo Lutheran Church in partnership with University Medical Center and Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center El Paso (TTUHSC El Paso). “We decided to found the RotaCare clinic to provide free medical access to those with the greatest need in our community,” remarks Malena Field, Chairperson of the RotaCare Board of Directors. The RotaCare Clinic is open every Saturday from 9:00 am to 12:00 pm. Patients come from various legal and cultural backgrounds, including those who are uninsured, underinsured, American citizens, immigrants of any documentation status, and all age ranges.

The clinic is staffed by a volunteer team made up of physicians from TTUHSC El Paso and the community, Paul L. Foster School of Medicine students, University of Texas El Paso pre-medical students, social workers, and TTUHSC El Paso graduate students, all under the guidance of Clinic Manager Betty Gallegos, RN, and Medical Director Richard McCallum, MD.

What services does RotaCare offer?
At RotaCare, the staff takes a “whole patient” approach to healthcare. For this reason, RotaCare is proud to offer a broad variety of health-related services to patients, all free of charge. The in-house laboratory is stocked with equipment to run both same-day and send-out labs. Though the clinic is designed to address primary care concerns, there are also medical specialists who rotate through the clinic on a monthly or bimonthly basis, including ophthalmology, gynecology, gastroenterology, and orthopedics. To empower patients to lead healthier lives through good food choices and exercise, RotaCare offers free, bilingual nutrition classes once a month on the campus, and for patients with financial concerns or who require care beyond RotaCare, social workers function as integral members of the clinic to assist patients in accessing additional resources. The clinic is also proud to host periodic health fairs in which community members gain information about health services in their communities and participate in health screenings. All these efforts provide access to critical services that would otherwise be inaccessible to many patients.

How has RotaCare impacted our community?
Since its founding, the RotaCare clinic has provided services to more than 3,000 individuals in the El Paso community. This represents a time commitment of more than 14,000 total volunteer hours among student and physician volunteers.

As a free clinic, RotaCare is often the entry point into the healthcare system for many of its patients, some of whom have not received medical care for more than 10 years or who do not have the financial means or transportation to seek care elsewhere. Through its medical and social work teams, patients can access services that are beneficial on both the individual and societal level, such as primary care, vaccines, and screenings for infectious disease and cancer. Services are offered in both Spanish and English, with many bilingual providers and volunteers who are happy to serve patients in their native language.

How has RotaCare impacted medical education?
While the first priority at RotaCare is always patient care, the second is medical education. Some of RotaCare’s most enthusiastic supporters are its student volunteers, including undergraduate, graduate, and medical students. On any given clinic day, up to 24 students commit their Saturday to serving and learning from the RotaCare patients.

Each patient encounter is student-led from start to finish, allowing students to practice history-taking and diagnostic skills with a hands-on approach. Students are exposed to a variety of chronic and acute conditions in both primary and specialty care settings, which gives them
opportunities to apply information learned in the classroom to real-world scenarios. When asked why she has returned to volunteer at RotaCare numerous times throughout her medical school career, third-year medical student Nayana Thomas stated, “it is my way of giving back to the community that welcomed me and provided me with the opportunity to learn medicine... It is an honor to humbly serve and learn from a deserving population.” Furthermore, volunteering at RotaCare helps students to keep all their hard work in perspective. Former Medical Student Director, Natalie Satterfield, articulates what RotaCare has meant for her own education: “Coming to RotaCare every weekend allowed us an opportunity to be reminded of what brought us [to medical school] in the first place, the significance of serving others, and the importance of consistently showing up every weekend regardless of what we have going on in our outside lives.”

How has RotaCare served patients during the COVID-19 crisis?
When COVID-19 cases were identified in the El Paso area, the RotaCare Board of Directors made the difficult decision to cease in-person services. However, the RotaCare team continues to fulfill its dual mission of patient care and medical education by providing services over the phone. Patients may reach the RotaCare remote team at a temporary phone line (915) 267-0505, where medical students are on-call during normal operating hours every Saturday to address concerns under the supervision of Dr. McCallum. To further serve the RotaCare patient community, medical students are currently in the process of reaching out to all patients seen recently at the clinic to assess general wellness, determine any need for medication refills, and provide recommendations about infection control. Through this service, the RotaCare team hopes to maintain continuity of care and access to resources for the vulnerable patient population that they serve.

Pending local and federal recommendations regarding infection control, the RotaCare clinic hope to reestablish in-person visits mid-July. Reopening the clinic will depend on the team’s ability to acquire adequate personal protective equipment (PPE) to ensure patient and volunteer safety at the clinic. To donate to the PPE fund, please reach out to Betty Gallegos at (915) 873-0519.

The future of RotaCare

Through expanding current initiatives and launching new programs, RotaCare hopes to continue to evolve to better serve the El Paso community. First and foremost, the clinic is always seeking to expand its physician volunteer base. Both generalists and specialists are encouraged to participate. By increasing the number of physicians available to volunteer, the clinic will be able to both see more patients and improve the quality of medical education by increasing the amount of time attending physicians spend with each medical student.

In addition to increasing the number of providers, RotaCare is also hoping to acquire equipment that will expand the number of services offered at the clinic. In particular, the clinic would like to obtain equipment required to provide glasses to its patients. In addition, the RotaCare leadership also hopes to partner with other medical student-led clinics such as the TTUHSC El Paso Medical Student-Run Clinic in Sparks and the Baptist Clinic to maximize patient access to services such as Specialty Days, the Mammogram Bus and Walk With A Doc.

The leadership of the RotaCare clinic would like to express their deepest appreciation for the donors, volunteers, and other supporters whose generosity and dedication make healthcare a possibility for many throughout the greater El Paso community. To get involved with RotaCare, please contact Betty Gallegos at (915) 873-0519.

Closing comments from Dr. McCallum, Medical Director:
I am often asked about the future of medicine- I can reassure you the future of medicine is in very good hands. I observe the next generation of physicians every Saturday and also have the privilege of mentoring them. They are visibly demonstrating through their commitment and compassion how they will be fulfilling the Hippocratic Oath during their future careers. This reassures me that our Admissions Committee who select medical students for acceptance to the Paul L. Foster School of Medicine are receiving applications from students who not only have all the right academic credentials but also who want to contribute to humanity and serve their communities and advocate for the welfare of their patients, with a focus on the “holistic” approaches to patient care.

It has been one of the highlights of my medical career to serve in this capacity of Medical Director of RotaCare Free Clinic. I would like to recognize the support of the Rotary Club while also being cognizant that “volunteering” is a family sacrifice and especially thanking my wife of 47 years, Mary Beth, for her support.