Focus of Mailman School's New Orleans Aid Shifts to Community Health

By Kelsy Chauvin

Two more than months after Katrina struck, scores of rescue and recovery workers—from the Red Cross and other relief groups, FEMA and private industry—remain in New Orleans, helping the devastated city get back to some version of normal.

Their numbers include the Columbia University-sponsored “Operation Assist,” a joint initiative of the Mailman School of Public Health and the Children’s Health Fund (CHF). The operation, which was launched in the immediate wake of Hurricane Katrina to provide emergency health services for victims, is housed in two Mobile Medical Units (MMUs). Each MMU is a 35-foot-long RV containing two examination rooms and a nurse’s station as well as waiting and registration areas. The units come fully equipped with medicine and diagnostic equipment, computers, satellite and standard communications, and power generators.

On a sunny afternoon in New Orleans last month, a visit to one of these remarkable clinics-on-wheels revealed three doctors and two nurses, from CHF and Tulane University Medical Center, hard at work treating some 60-70 patients.

The team had been at it since one week after the hurricane, when the unit was driven south from Idaho to dispense emergency medical services.

Having been all over south-eastern Louisiana, this particular MMU is now stationed at a FEMA disaster-assistance site in a vacant parking lot near a shopping center in western New Orleans. In the beginning, the team was treating upper respiratory illnesses stirred up by the storm. Traumatic injuries, lacerations, and back and arm pain were also common.

Now, however, the unit spends most of its time returning patients to their regular medications. “We’ve shifted from disaster response to community medicine,” said team leader Michael Duffy, a family physician from Twin Falls, Idaho. “We’re meeting emergency needs, getting patients back on their meds. But that we can eventually turn over operations to Tulane (University Medical Center).”

Most of the team’s current patients are hard pressed to find medical attention with the closure of so many local doctors’ offices, as well as several hospitals. Duffy explained, “There are a lot of displaced physicians, just as there are a lot of displaced residents.”

How does the team know whom to target? According to Duffy, “That’s the largest obstacle in doing what we do, just finding out where the need is You have to be a part-time private investigator and word of mouth is the best tool for us.”

Operation Assist will press on for at least several more weeks, focusing on locations where resources are limited and need is greatest—particularly as residents return to the city and schools reopen.

For more information on Operation Assist, go to www.childrenshealthfund.org.

Columbia Students Call Meeting to Draft Legislation for $30 Billion National Tuition Endowment

Seven out of every ten college students carry debt today, and economists agree that the figure could become nine out of ten within the next decade—if tuition inflation keeps up its current pace.

Tuition is rising an average of 7% to 8 percent annually, at least twice as fast as overall inflation, according to the College Board, the New York-based organization that administers the SAT.

In response to this nationwide tuition crisis, student leaders from around the country congregated at Columbia on Nov 3 and 4 to draft the legislative language for the National Tuition Endowment Act (NTE Act), which, if passed by Congress, would generate money from a variety of sources. Interest from federal student and parent loans and the money saved in removing tax-exemption subsidies for private lenders are among the proposed measures for increasing student aid.

The endowment will not replace current Congressional funding to students. Rather, the NTE Act aims to legislate that all income generated from the federal student aid system, along with real and potential savings from that system, gets returned to students.

The two-day event, co-organized by Nate Walker (TC’07) and Matan Ariel (GO’06), included students from Columbia University, Barnard College, Teachers College, Yale University, Princeton University, the American Student Association of Community Colleges and the Minnesota State Student Association, as well as executives from the United States Student Association and the State PIRG’s Higher Education Project.

Michael Dannenberg, a former education scholar turned director of the education policy program of the New America Foundation, addressed the students and was on hand throughout the day to assist the groups with developing the legislative language.

By the end of day two, the students had achieved consensus on eligibility: low- and middle-income undergraduates will be able to receive a National Tuition Scholarship the same way that Pell recipi ents receive their aid.

The NTE Act authors are now seeking bi-partisan sponsorship to get their plan into law. Their hope is that the appropriations and education committees in the House and Senate will review the bill in the spring of 2006 and bring it to the floors in the summer or early fall,” said Walker.

To read the legislative draft in full, go to www.TuitionEndowment.org

Awards & Honors

The Council of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the world’s largest general science society and publisher of the journal Science, has elected 576 members as fellows, including four Columbia University faculty members: DAVID H. COHEN, professor of chemistry and biological sciences, was cited for developing one of the first wire transfer models for cellular studies of learning; JAMES L. LEIGHTON, professor of chemistry, for his extraordinary work on chiral receptors and stereoselective reactions and in total synthesis of natural products; AARON P. MITCHELL, the Harold S. Ginsberg Professor of Molecular Pathogenesis in the Department of Microbiology, for his distinction contributions to the field of molecular medical mycology and his novel genetic approaches to dissecting signaling networks governing fungal virulence; and JEFFREY D. SACHS, director of the Earth Institute and the UN Millennium Project, for his original economic research and commitment to applying that research to issues of sustainable development and global equity. … CAROL L. PRIVES, professor of biological sciences, is among 64 newly elected members of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. Prives was credited for her fundamental contributions to the understanding of tumor suppression and her outstanding and inspiring mentoring to her students and postdoctoral fellows, particularly women. … With the receipt of the Society for Experimental Social Psychology’s Distinguished Science Award in 2005, GERRY HIGGINS, a professor of psychology and business management, is now one of only three social psychologists ever to have received the “quadruple crown” of their field. In 1999, he won the Donald T. Campbell Award and in 2000, he received the American Psychological Association’s Distinguished Scientist Award and the American Psychological Association’s Association’s Award for Distinguished Scientific Contribution to Applied Psychology. His research is internationally known as an expert in motivation and social interaction, having made major theoretical contributions to both fields. He is currently developing a psychological theory on values and where they come from.