Public-MINDED

Three physicians step outside their offices to focus on the health of their communities.

BY SUZY FRISCH

Physicians are trained to help individual patients stay healthy or recover from ailments. And most thrive doing that. But for some, that’s just not enough. They want to have a broader and deeper impact on the health of the public at large. Doing so is not as easy as it sounds. Doctors face challenges at every turn. They must devote extra time, find willing partners and secure funding. Then there’s the question of how to communicate with the public.

Talk to physicians involved in public health, though, and they’ll say the extra effort is worth it because they’re reaching people who avoid doctors’ offices, inspiring them to take action and preventing a legion of health problems.

More than a few Minnesota physicians have gotten the public health bug in recent years. Here are the stories of three of them and the projects with which they’ve been involved.

The Heart of New Ulm

Ask New Ulm residents what’s best about their city and the usual response is beer, brats and butter (all are made in town). With strong German roots and a love of festivals, city residents enjoy the products of their labors. Perhaps too much. Until a few years ago, they had somewhat higher-than-average rates of smoking, obesity and metabolic syndrome, and too many were sedentary.

Officials at Allina Health, the only health care provider in this town of 13,500, knew their patients were at risk for cardiovascular disease and started talking with leaders from the Minneapolis Heart Institute and its foundation about working together to address the problem, as 90 percent of the area’s residents used Allina’s New Ulm Medical Center for their care. So in 2008, Allina and the Minneapolis Heart Institute Foundation launched a 10-year effort aimed at preventing cardiovascular disease in New Ulm. Called Hearts Beat Back: The Heart of New Ulm Project, it involves community education, medical intervention and environmental change.

Early on, those involved realized they needed a local doctor to connect the medical, research and community components. The Heart of New Ulm’s Charles Stephens, M.D., practices what he preaches by biking to work.
Although family physician Charles Stephens, M.D., didn’t have a background in research or public health, he agreed to serve as medical director. “It seemed like a good idea. Being a primary care doctor, I see people who have heart disease and obesity all the time,” he says. “We need to move treatment upstream and cut down on people having heart attacks.”

Stephens joined about 35 other medical and community leaders on the Heart of New Ulm Project’s steering committee and agreed to act as the medical face of the campaign. Describing himself as a cheerleader for the project, he promoted it on television and in the newspaper and spoke to community groups. He also attended numerous planning meetings, worked to line up partners, and helped plan various initiatives and events to educate physicians and other health care providers about the latest research on cardiovascular disease.

Stephens has encouraged residents to exercise and eat healthfully. He also practices what he preaches: “People know me as the nut on the bicycle here because I ride my bike to work. I’m happy to be visible that way. If it tweaks someone to make a good decision, I’m happy with that,” he says.

The efforts are paying off. Since 2009, more than 5,000 residents have been screened for heart disease (LDL, HDL, triglycerides, total cholesterol), diabetes (fasting glucose), coronary artery disease (hs-CRP) and kidney function at events held at workplaces, the medical center, the community center, recreation centers and churches. And, over the last four years, 20 percent of the community has lost 10 pounds or more, Stephens notes. In addition, the percentage of people ages 40 through 79 with hypertension dropped from 20.6 percent to 17.9 percent, while the percentage of residents with high cholesterol levels declined from 10.8 percent to 8.6 percent. Because Allina has a robust electronic health record system, it has been possible to track patients’ health measures and the results of interventions.

Stephens says his patients like to credit him for their weight loss. But he says the initiative and communitywide support were the keys to their success. “I can’t take credit,” he says. “The idea is to put out multiple options for people so they can find what works for them. We’re seeing improvements here, but as our hospital president says, this is not a program that has a completion date.”

**Preventing pertussis**

Minnesota was experiencing a resurgence of pertussis when Patrick Zook, M.D., heard Mayo Clinic pediatrician Robert Jacobson, M.D., speak about vaccine resistance to a group of area doctors in 2012. That talk got him thinking that more people in his St. Cloud community needed to get vaccinated if they were to prevent the spread of the disease often called whooping cough. Even though Zook, a family physician, was unfamiliar with leading public health campaigns, he decided to meet the pertussis outbreak head on.

Tapping into his experience as president of the Stearns Benton Medical Society and in leading other organizations, Zook pulled together a group of medical, public health, civic and business leaders willing to address pertussis and other public health issues in the area. In just a few months, he had enlisted about 25 members, and together they secured two $10,000 grants—one from the CentraCare Foundation and the other from the Stea-
pertussis. Called the Central Minnesota Immunization Campaign, it features posters with different people from the community, including St. Cloud Mayor Dave Kleis, showing off their post-vaccine bandaged arms.

They also decided to hold vaccination clinics. To do so, they had to find locations with enough insurance to cover any liability, and they had to investigate regulations for giving medicine in public and who could give the shots. They also had to wade through insurance policies to see how to bill people’s insurers for the vaccines. They ended up holding clinics at health expos for seniors, veterans and Hispanics as well as at several summer festivals.

Hundreds of area residents have been vaccinated as a result of the campaign. And Zook’s reward has been seeing infection rates drop significantly. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, the three counties had 267 confirmed and probable cases of pertussis in 2012. In 2013, they had 101.

In addition to wanting to improve the health of the public in central Minnesota, Zook had other reasons for getting involved in the campaign. After practicing for 36 years—all of them in St. Cloud—he is preparing to wind down his practice (he is preparing to wind down his practice...