

'AMPUTATION SEASON'

Occupy Medical addresses winter's effects on the unhoused

Despite signs of spring in Oregon, the risk of frostbite is still prevalent with freezing nights and cold rain. It is still what Occupy Medical volunteers call "amputation season."

"It begins in December," clinic manager Sue Sierralupe says. It only takes one night of exposure to get frostbite, she adds.

On a Sunday morning, before the all-volunteer health care staff begins seeing patients at Occupy Medical (OM), Sierralupe guides two potential volunteers around the clinic's temporary indoor space at 13th Avenue and Ferry Street. She shows them the bus that serves as mobile clinic — a former bloodmobile.

Since 2011, Occupy Medical has served over 8,381 patients, Sierralupe says. The free medical service began as a first aid tent during the Occupy movement in October of that year. The volunteers provide preventative and medical treatment for people who are unhoused, such as cleaning wounds and treating burns, essential treatments during the winter.

Without basic shelter, the unhoused are more susceptible to preventable conditions such as frostbite.

Sierralupe tells the story of a young man with a seizure disorder who kicked off his shoes while he was convulsing. "He lost all ten toes," she says. She asks, "Do you have a weak stomach?" and scrolls through her phone's photo library, keeping names and faces private.

The young man's toes are black. He went to the hospital, where his toes were wrapped, and then he was sent back out on the street, Sierralupe says. Blisters eventually formed on the man's toes. All ten were later amputated.

"It's so preventable," Sierralupe says in frustration. "Our society is wasting billions of dollars on preventable stuff."

In 2010, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 86 percent of all health care spending was for people with chronic medical conditions. The CDC cites the expansion of health care as one of four domains vital to preventing chronic disease.

From noon until 4 pm on Sundays, Occupy Medical provides patients with wound care, triage, counseling and hygiene care products, and sometimes haircuts. The free service turns no one away and offers a holistic approach to health.

Winter weather poses additional health risks to the unhoused. Volunteer nurse Anand Holtham-Keathly says the combination of people being exposed to the elements and constantly being on their feet retains moisture, creating the perfect environment for trench foot.

But volunteers use even the simplest materials to treat patients. Bread bags are useful for wound care and trench foot prevention, Sierralupe says.

Both Holtham-Keathly and Sierralupe take turns talking about what happens when unhoused patients don't realize how bad their diabetes has gotten. They've cut boots off of people with swollen feet; sometimes the people don't realize how bad the problem is until they see it. "When people have diabetes, their nerves go," Sierralupe says.

Patients with chronic conditions would receive needed treatment if they had somewhere to go. Volunteer nurse Judy Sieber, dressed in blue *Frozen*-themed scrubs, works in OM's wound care station. She says the clinic has been able to save people from diabetic wounds that can often lead to amputation.

"White Bird is full [and they] don't have any room for chronic patients," Sierralupe says.

Occupy has seen three patients who have undergone amputations this year. Sierralupe says they are still treating people with frostbite. A few years ago, a woman lost a toe and then another and more recently lost her leg.

"These people losing limbs slowly is the definition of torture," Sierralupe says.

Gaps in the health care system, along with guidelines from health insurance companies, dictate what treatment doctors can provide.

Uninsured people suffering from frostbite who seek medical treatment sometimes have to wait until their flesh

rots before the body part can be amputated. "Doctors will often say come back when it's bad enough to amputate," Sierralupe says.

Winter is also known as burn season. As temperatures dip, the risk of burns increases as people try to stay warm. Sieber recently treated someone and gave them dressings and zinc to take care of the wound.

As people line up in the temporary indoor space, volunteers buzz around the room ensuring that people fill out forms and have a number and a plate of food.

"Health care is a human right," is the slogan printed on OM's shirts. The group believes in and provides a model for universal health care.

Sierralupe says the continued efforts by the city to push the homeless out of downtown can worsen situations. "When they push them out they can't be in large groups and have to be alone," she says.

Eugene City Council's proposed dog ban would push unhoused dog owners out of downtown, but would allow residents of downtown to walk their dogs. "I don't appreciate my tax dollars being used to make downtown a gated community," Sierralupe says. The council has also proposed a smoking ban, which targets the homeless as well.

The unhoused suffering from medical conditions like diabetes or seizures can also be victimized and robbed for the drugs used to treat their condition. Medications are valuable on the street because they can be stolen or traded for cigarettes or other needed items.

The threat of violence is especially great to unhoused women suffering from medical conditions. Sierralupe says victims of sexual assault can become pregnant or need to be treated for an STD.

What began as a first aid tent at the Occupy camp now provides care to 40 to 60 patients every Sunday. Sierralupe says the nonprofit can always use socks, ibuprofen or whatever supplies people can donate. It's a safe space for families to come, too, she says, with toys for children.

"Loving people is a skill you have to work on," Sierralupe says of helping the unhoused.

Occupy Medical is at 509 E. 13th Avenue. They take patients from 11:45 am until 3 pm on Sunday. OM can be reached at 541-316-5743 or oc-cmednow@gmail.com. Licensed medical professionals are always needed to volunteer, and OM can always use medical, dental and hygiene supplies.

HAPPENING PEOPLE

BY PAUL NEEVEL



ILENE CUMMINGS

"I've had two lives," says Ilene Cummings, who grew up in Irvington, New Jersey, got married after high school and had five children by age 35. "I was a full-time homemaker: PTA and apple pie." Then, at 38, she enrolled at nearby Ocean County College. Eight years later, with a degree in literature from Fairleigh Dickinson University and a divorce, she returned to OCC to start up a non-credit human growth and development program at the Center for Adults in Transition. "It was the era of civil rights and feminism," she says. "Women came out in droves. I was still a devoted mother, but I stopped ironing the dish towels." She resigned six years later to open a human development counseling practice. When her children had moved on, she sold the house and took a job offer in San Francisco. "After 15 months I went out on my own," she says. "I did women's groups, men's groups, retreats and seminars. People asked me to speak at events." At 71, she earned a doctor of ministry degree at Matthew Fox's University of Creation Spirituality in Oakland. "It helped me to develop my writing skills," says Cummings, now 85. She has devoted her time to writing since 2010, when she moved to Eugene, home to her son James. Her book, *The Truth is at my Front Door: Spiritual Direction on Aging Beautifully*, was published in December of 2016. A churchgoer since childhood and a Quaker since her 40s, Cummings will offer a workshop based on the book, free and open to the public, 2-4 pm on Sundays, March 12 and 19, at the Eugene Friends Meeting House, 2274 Onyx Street.