

## 2008 Fact Sheet:

# Finding the way: Patient navigators

### WHAT IS A PATIENT NAVIGATOR?

It is well known that striking disparities in health status exist between racial and ethnic groups and the majority population. Patient navigation is recognized as a successful approach to reducing these disparities. The first patient navigation project was developed by Dr. Harold Freeman, a surgical oncologist at Harlem Hospital, after learning that there was a widespread delay in diagnosis of breast cancer among African American women in Harlem. Members of the community who are knowledgeable about the health care system, called "patient navigators," helped patients find their way in the health care system, coordinated services and resolved problems that were delaying care.

Today, patient navigators are used in a variety of health care settings, including several sites in Washington State. Patient navigators work to make the health care system more "user friendly" and culturally competent, not just for their own clients but for all members of the target community. They combine the roles of case manager, patient advocate and guardian angel. They coordinate services among medical providers, schedule appointments, arrange interpreter services, assist patients in obtaining financial coverage for their care, and facilitate transportation and child care for medical appointments. Navigators also educate people about their chronic conditions and treatment plan. They educate health professionals about how to address individual patients' needs.

### WHY ARE PATIENT NAVIGATORS IMPORTANT?

Factors like cultural background, geography, economics, and education influence people's access to quality care and optimal use of health care, especially for people with chronic health conditions. Patients, family members, caregivers, and physicians often lack the information they need to determine the most appropriate treatment plan. The policies of health care organizations are not adapted to the needs and cultural values of all those they treat. Patient navigators can bridge these gaps, and they can improve care and lower costs in the process.

### CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL PATIENT NAVIGATOR

The essential characteristic of patient navigators is that they combine wisdom about their community's culture with knowledge of the health care system. In order to achieve the goal of reducing health disparities, the patient navigator must be:

- A respected source of information among people in the target community, able to interpret the medical culture to those unfamiliar with it, and to help overcome barriers to the use of services.
- Sensitive and compassionate about the concerns and fears of patients and their families
- Very knowledgeable about the environment and health care system through which the patient must move in order to obtain care
- Skilled at communicating with health care providers and institutions about patients' cultural needs
- Able to link people to health care resources in a timely fashion

In addition, health care providers and institutions such as hospitals must be willing to establish rapport with navigators. Higher level authority within the health care system must recognize, accept, and support the role of navigators with respect to:

- Enabling patients to access care
- Facilitating timely care for patients
- Catalyzing changes in the system of care when necessary to respond to client needs and reach the objectives of improved care

People with many different job titles carry out health navigation: Community Health Workers, *promotoras*, Tribal Community Health Representatives, Cultural Mediator/Medical Interpreters.

## WHAT IS HAPPENING IN WASHINGTON?

**TRIBAL NAVIGATORS:** The National Cancer Institute is funding a cancer navigation initiative by the Northwest Indian Health Board. Headed by Victoria Warren-Mears, Ph.D., R.D., L.D., the Northwest Tribal Cancer Navigator Project, will work in conjunction with tribal health centers. It will expand an existing navigation project into four diverse tribal communities, including the Yakama Nation, and provide breast, cervical, prostate and colorectal cancer navigation services.

**KOMEN FOUNDATION:** The Komen Foundation Puget Sound Affiliate is funding two breast health navigation programs in Washington State. These programs focus on linkage and follow-up for women undergoing treatment for breast cancer.

**PILOT PROJECT DEVELOPMENT:** In 2006, the Washington State Medical Assistance Advisory Committee (MAAC) asked the Department of Social and Health Services to explore patient navigation funding as a way to decrease racial/ethnic health disparities in Washington State. HRSA submitted a decision package to the governor asking for funding of navigator pilot projects to provide navigation resources. We received legislative funding that will allow up to 1000 clients to benefit from patient navigation in the next biennium. The MAAC Health Disparities Subcommittee is developing recommendations about how to solicit interest in the pilot projects, and about the criteria for approval and potential sources of technical assistance.

**COMMUNITY BRAINSTORMING:** The Health Disparities Subcommittee sponsored a brainstorming and presentation session in July 2006, inviting participation from a number of community initiatives to decrease racial and ethnic disparities. Health workers who perform navigation services presented and discussed their work, including *promotoras*, community health workers, and cross-cultural interpreters. In January 2007, HRSA held a round-table with tribal leaders to learn about tribal initiatives to end disparities including the Community Health Representatives program. In both these sessions, participants identified systemic barriers that interfere with the elimination of health disparities: the history of discrimination, communities' lack of trust of authority, absence of the institutional support for navigators needed to effect changes in systems, and lack of financial sustainability of pilot projects, among others.

### OTHER RECENT INITIATIVES

- The Hospital Association of New York State and Pfizer have developed a set of manuals and CD-ROMs dedicated to training navigators under the original guidelines that Dr. Freeman developed.
- In 2005, Congress passed the Patient Navigator, Outreach, and Chronic Disease Prevention Act, a five-year demonstration program for patient navigator services through Community Health Care Centers, National Cancer Institute Centers and Rural Health Clinics across the country. The law had broad bipartisan support, but at last check, is not funded for this fiscal year.
- The National Cancer Institute wants to study various forms of navigation to understand what works well and has recently funded research to develop a patient navigator research program focused on cancer care. The five-year grants are to be administered by the institute's Center to Reduce Cancer Health Disparities (CRCHD).