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## Street-side manner

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### Dr. Ellen Beck and her UCSD students give medical help to the homeless

**By David E. Graham**  
UNION-TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

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Paul Moorman called out like a soft-spoken carnival barker to the line of homeless people sitting on the sidewalk.

"Anybody need a doctor? Anybody need medical care?"

One man said he wanted his blood pressure checked.

"There's the doctor's office," said Dr. Ellen Beck with a smile as she pointed to a weathered canvas-upholstered office chair on the sidewalk.

The man plopped into the chair and a medical student wrapped his arm with a blood-pressure cuff and started talking to him about his health.

Twice a month, Beck, a family medicine physician who teaches at UCSD, and Moorman, who used to be homeless, team with medical students in downtown San Diego at night to provide care to dispossessed people who otherwise might not see a doctor.

"Can you do a pregnancy test?" asked another man, his arm steadying his girlfriend, who he said was queasy from drinking too much. He said he suspects she is pregnant and wants her to stop drinking if she is. Beck handed him a pregnancy test to use when she sobered up and information about a prenatal clinic.

Another woman received bandages for sores on her feet.

"Can I get a frontal lobotomy?" asked a man, drawing smiles and laughter.

Sweat socks, blankets and granola bars were available to anybody who wanted them.

Moorman, Beck and her students provide treatment on the spot when they can, refer people to an emergency room if the problem is urgent and in most cases urge people to attend a free clinic for the poor that Beck and her students hold Monday nights at First Lutheran Church downtown. The street homeless outreach, as Beck calls it, is part of the UCSD Student-Run Free Clinic Project that she organizes.

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## First-hand experience

Moorman moves comfortably among the homeless, unaffected by eccentric behaviors around him. He chooses where the team goes.

He was homeless in San Diego and overcame his addiction to crack a few years ago, he said. He spends much of his time on the same streets, though, trying to steer other homeless to medical care, counseling and perhaps a better life.

After an hour with a group of homeless a stone's throw from San Diego police headquarters in East Village, Moorman drove his van, which he makes available to the team, to the eastern boundary of the Petco Park construction site. There, under bright street lights, a couple of dozen people, men and women, old and young, huddled under blankets and sleeping bags against a light chill.

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"I used to sleep out here. This is my old hangout," Moorman said as he shook hands with some of the people and offered medical care.

Nearly everyone declined help. But after a few minutes a few men walked up to the team's van. One asked for cough medicine and a cell phone to call a friend, another sought care for the pain in his leg.

People often take some time to decide whether they trust the doctors, Beck said.

For years Victor Divila, 37, fought depression that cost him his office job, he said, and he has struggled with letting others know he is gay. Now he has kidney stones – a condition Beck tells him can be aggravated by the stress of street life and too little water.

Divila said he takes a medication that causes him to sleep late into the morning, so he was ticketed by police for loitering.

Beck gave him some granola bars and encouraged him to go to the Monday night church clinic for evaluation of his depression medications.

Some homeless will actually go to the clinic, Beck said, but many will not. They have apprehensions about negotiating a unfamiliar environment or a potential bureaucracy, she said. Others simply fear losing their sleeping spot on the street, Moorman said. Thus the street visits become important opportunities for medical care for potentially hundreds of homeless, Beck said.

Earlier in the evening, before the team left the church parking lot for its outing, Moorman spotted the night's first patient, a man sitting on a porch step on a street corner a block away. He walked to the man, who said his feet hurt. Because he would not come to them, the doctors drove to him.

The scene seemed to follow a script from the Bible as the doctor and a student, wearing surgical gloves, thoroughly washed black grime from the man's feet to reveal a network of red sores.

As they bathed his feet for several minutes, the man, calling himself Bambam and saying he is 60, clutched a bottle in a brown paper bag and looked up into the air spouting fragments of conversation at the

group.

### **Doctor's prescription**

Beck approaches the evening with cheer and a sense of affection for her patients, despite often unpleasant surroundings.

Born in Montreal, the married mother of three teenage daughters is a woman of broad-ranging interests.

Before starting the mission one recent night, she showed up moments late, having just come from her hip-hop dance class, where at 51, she said, she is the oldest student.

Beck gives her time to the street visits, she said, because many people have an unmet need. And she does not believe that being homeless, or having the mental illness or addictions that often accompany homelessness, should disqualify anyone for medical care.

"I'm trying to help them feel they are not alone in the world," Beck said.

She tries to develop trust with the homeless so they will accept care, show up at the Monday clinic and go on to pursue other counseling. A church member, Jim Lovell, sometimes joins the team to talk to people about social services, including access to housing and disability benefits.

"We're trying to create an environment where people can take charge of their lives and revive a sense of joy and well-being," Beck said. "You're getting in touch with their own capabilities and strengths."

It has worked, she said. They treated a homeless teenager who had complications from an abortion, and after weeks of going to the clinic, she returned to her family.

A diabetic man requested to have sores on his foot checked. He came to the clinic and got help finding housing, avoiding a potential amputation had he stayed on the street. Controlling his diabetes spared his eyesight.

While the nighttime missions go unnoted by most San Diegans, they do not go unnoticed by the broader medical community.

This spring, the student-staffed medical clinics for the poor were

awarded the Norman Cousins Award by the Fetzer Institute, a foundation supporting education and health care. The award was given to the UCSD free clinics for their emphasis on building trusting relationships that allow care to be delivered.

The first street visits started a couple of years ago.

Beck hopes the care for the homeless is benefiting the students just as much, but in another way. She thinks the program may improve the quality of care the future doctors will give throughout their careers.

Medical students enter school wanting to help people improve their lives, she said, adding that the passion wanes during seven to 10 years of demanding studies that emphasize the mastery of information.

"It's hard to keep that dream alive," Beck said.

It's hard to keep that dream alive, Beck said.

She hopes the contact with the poor will make them more empathetic and communicative and regard patients less as clinical objectives.

Second-year medical student Laurel Imhoff joined the team one recent night because, she said, "I'm traumatized by the disparities that exist in this world."

Others are eager, too. Of 122 UCSD students in the first year of medical study, more than 100 signed up for Beck's optional class that allows them to work in the clinic – so much demand that a drawing was held to see who would go first.

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