



These Boots are Made for...Volunteering?

By Karen C Vitale

Meet Dr. Elizabeth Crowley

Putting a New Face (and Footwear) on Cape May County's Volunteers in Medicine

Ask any of her patients what Dr. Elizabeth Crowley is best known for, and you're likely to hear one of two things: Changing the way medicine is practiced in Cape May County (she no longer accepts private healthcare insurance in her solo practice so she can guarantee her patients better quality of care), or the battered pair of Doc Martens she often wears, which have earned her the nickname Dr. Boots.

Now, Dr. Crowley is gaining notoriety for something new. In June of 2010, Dr. Boots stepped up to join the Volunteers in Medicine of Cape May County (VIM) staff as Medical Director. And those boots haven't stopped since.



MAKING A DIFFERENCE WHERE IT MATTERS MOST

A primary care physician who's been practicing in the area for over a decade, Dr. Crowley has referred plenty of patients to VIM, a clinic in Cape May Court House providing free primary healthcare to qualified uninsured patients living and working in Cape May County. Over the years, she has forged relationships with the free clinic's volunteer staff and Board of Trustees.

So when the former Medical Director Dr. Marna Cutler stepped down earlier this year, VIM Executive Director Jackie Meiluta reached out to Dr. Crowley and asked if she'd consider assuming the role. Dr. Crowley jumped at the chance to fill this critical position.

"For me, it's about getting back to why I became a doctor. It wasn't about paperwork, it was about helping people. In this role, I can ensure that the patients that live or work in Cape May County who need help the most get the healthcare they want and need, when they want and need it."

And this is a community where that help is desperately needed.

"In the past two months, it's become clear to me just how much this community relies on VIM," says Crowley. "Our patients truly have nowhere else to go for the care we provide. Nearly one in 10 residents of Cape May County does not have access to healthcare."

"What's more, our patients are not coming in with the easy cases. We're doing a lot of major disease management for diabetes and high blood pressure. It's crucial for patients to track and manage these chronic diseases, but it's also expensive...and when you're uninsured, that's a problem."

"Without our help, these patients would end up in the emergency room, where the taxpayer would have to shoulder the burden for expensive crisis care. Some people bristle at the idea of free healthcare, but no matter

where you stand on the debate, there's no question that quality primary care saves the system money. Our volunteer staff works closely with patients who want to be healthy, so we can manage potentially costly diseases up front."

LOOKING FOR A FEW GOOD VOLUNTEERS

That staff is another reason Dr. Crowley was so eager to join the VIM team. "When VIM first started in 2002, it consisted of a handful of volunteer docs and nurses, seeing patients a few nights a week," says Crowley. Since then, VIM has cared for over 3,000 patients and logged over 15,000 exams.

"I'm excited to be joining the team that built VIM up to where it is today. Their dedication amazes me. You will not find a more genuine group of people anywhere."

But finding more of them ranks high on Dr. Crowley's priority list. "By this time next year, my goal is to add more doctors, more nurses, more clinician providers, more specialists, and more infrastructure...all so we can serve more patients."

"Having skilled staff on hand is critical to so many of the services we provide," says Crowley. "It goes way beyond healthcare alone."

"When we prescribe medicines to patients without prescription plans, our nursing staff helps walk them through the complicated system of applying for patient assistance through the pharmaceutical companies. It's a really complex process, almost impossible for patients to navigate on their own. Our nurses make it feasible."

In addition to skilled nurses and clinicians, specialists are tops on Dr. Crowley's wish list. "Our diabetic patients require frequent eye and foot care. Local podiatrist, Dr. Carey and ophthalmologist, Dr. Altman see VIM patients at no charge. Retired orthopedist, Dr. Salvatore offers an Ortho Clinic once/month for VIM patients. Dr. Messori, a gastroenterologist from PA travels to VIM 2-3 times per month to see VIM patients that require this specialty. But there are so many more specialists from whom we need assistance. "It's costly for specialists to see patients for free. Few have extra money and time. But at some point, if patients don't get the care they need up front, specialists are going to end up seeing them in the hospital and not get paid...Why not do it now?"

QUALITY OF CARE

Though serving a larger patient base is a key part of Dr. Crowley's vision, it's not just a numbers game. Maintaining stellar quality of care is just as important. "Seeing lots of patients doesn't mean you're providing the best care to those patients," says Crowley. "I'm looking at different ways of measuring the quality of care we provide. Given our diabetic population, we're working toward qualifying for the Diabetes Recognition Program through the National Committee for Quality Assurance (NCQA). It measures evidence like hospitalization rates, blood pressure control and blood sugar levels to ensure patients are getting the appropriate level of care.

"When it comes to healthcare, free should never mean substandard," says Crowley.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Medical professions aren't the only MVPs on the VIM team. The clinic could not function without financial and volunteer support from the community.

“Donations are a huge help, there’s no doubt about that,” says Crowley. “And if you can contribute, we guarantee your funds go where they make the most difference – paying for prescription medicine, eye glasses, specialists, etc.”

But just as crucial are volunteers who are willing to donate their time. “We’re always looking for non-medical staff to handle the reception area, fundraising efforts and general administration.”

And even if you can’t give money or time, spreading the word about VIM helps carry the message to potential volunteers and patients in the community. And you never know where that seed you plant is going to take root. Dr. Crowley recently learned this herself when she was talking to a fellow doctor about VIM. It turns out he’d run a free clinic during his fellowship. Score one for social networking.

BE A PART OF SOMETHING BIG

“Physicians practicing medicine in NJ are under incredible strain,” says Crowley. “It’s almost ludicrous to ask busy docs to come in during their non-existent free time and see patients...for free.”

But that’s what Dr. Crowley is asking. Of every doctor, nurse and practitioner she knows. Of specialists and social workers. Of neighbors, friends and even strangers. Each one can come up with dozens of reasons not to. When the odds are stacked against a yes, why does she bother? “I know extra time is never going to magically drop into anyone’s lap. We need volunteers who believe healthcare can be more than what it is...and who are willing to carve out time for VIM because of that.”

“It’s like exercise. I’m always telling patients to make time to exercise. It’s a real struggle, but if you think it’s important enough, you find a way to do it.”

Dr. Crowley is currently training for her second half marathon. Most mornings you can find her running on the Ocean City Boardwalk around 5:30 am. But don’t, she begs...find her, that is. “I tend to run without my glasses on, which is fine unless I have to talk to someone. Not to mention that I’m a sweaty mess. But a year ago, I would have told you I didn’t have time to exercise. Or to put in the time I’m dedicating to VIM. ”

Lucky for patients of Cape May County’s VIM clinic, she was wrong.

In addition to her responsibilities at VIM, Dr. Crowley runs a solo family practice in Cape May Court House and serves on the Board of the New Jersey Academy of Family Physicians. She lives in Marmora with her husband and two children.

For more information about how to qualify for VIM services or volunteer your time, call Volunteers in Medicine at 609-463-2846 or visit <http://www.vimcmc.org>.