

ISCOPES Offers a *Walk in My Shoes* Experience

Students experienced firsthand the challenges of those who may be discriminated against or misunderstood while trying to secure health care for themselves and their families. Using an innovative “walk in my shoes” approach, GW’s Interdisciplinary Student Community-Oriented Prevention Enhancement Service (ISCOPES) provided about 50 students with new identities and charged them with finding the health care they needed to address their illness.

One student became a 79-year-old African American male, while another was a 20-year-old Ethiopian woman who had difficulty with the English language—both examples of the diversity of identities that were assumed during the early Saturday morning training session in January.

“We wanted to provide our future health care providers with this unique learning experience to enhance the students’ cultural sensitivity,” said Emily Morrison, director of GW’s ISCOPEs program. “Through the program, we wanted to raise the students’ awareness of health access issues for low-income and underserved individuals, increase students’ knowledge about local and federal programs, and develop sensitivity toward others.”

With their new identities, students visited various stations manned by volunteers representing services these individuals needed to access. Among the service areas offered were emergency care, employment, pediatric clinics, examination rooms, government offices and home. Station volunteers for the activity included those who routinely assist the underserved in the community, including staff from Community of Hope, Mary’s Center, Unity Healthcare System, La Clinica del Pueblo, IONA Senior Services, The World Bank and GW. Throughout the morning training, students navigated the hurdles to achieve their goal—obtaining health care service.

As with everyday life, the students had difficulty getting the care they



needed. Michelle Yun, a first-year medical student, said, “Actually experiencing the stress and intensity of trying to access services and the frustration of going through bureaucratic red tape and having unexpected emergencies was eye opening.”

Another student shared, “I was a woman from the Congo and needed interpretation services. But, when it was finally my turn with the interpreter, I was distraught when the interpreter didn’t speak my language—all of that time I spent waiting and still I had no care.”

“It was a really great experience that echoed real life in the best way possible,” said first-year medical student Ashley Bell. “It was a very thought-provoking exercise.”

Students were not the only ones to experience confusion, frustration or surprise during the simulation, said Morrison. “The volunteers reported similar feelings from different vantage points. Several volunteers expressed frustration at not being able to provide medications or specialty care to participants because they did not have the proper documentation or the means to

pay for the needed services.”

For Isabel van Isschot from La Clinica del Pueblo, frustration soon set in. “As a bilingual staff person, I was not able to do my assigned job responsibilities because I kept being pulled from my work to translate for a patient who came in and was not able to communicate with the provider,” she said.

Walk in My Shoes was developed by Boston-based Community Catalyst, a national consumer health advocacy organization. “It provides a valuable opportunity to shed light on the complexity of the U.S. health care system for both students and volunteers,” said Morrison. “Following the exercise, everyone engaged in an in-depth discussion for more than an hour, identifying both direct and indirect ways by which each person can play a role in improving access and providing more culturally sensitive care. The lasting message was that there is a lot of work to be done, but we each must take steps forward and, collectively, we can transform the quality of health in our community.”