SEP Summary – Vaishnavi Siripurapu

Through the gracious support of the Brody Foundation SEP program, I was able to partner with my peer, Ella Whitfield to implement an intensive cardiovascular health education initiative targeting patients with chronic cardiovascular health concerns admitted to the ECU Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation Unit. During the course of this project, Ella and I designed six different healthy cooking classes featuring over 20 healthy, adaptable recipes. We printed 6 cookbooks to distribute to patients and provided 3 healthy nonperishable recipes to the occupational therapy department for use in rehabilitation therapy. Overall, we have conducted 15 culinary medicine sessions and have provided education and intensive support to over 2 dozen patients, as well as 50+ community members. Furthermore, we received $150 in continuation funding through the ECU parents fund, enabling us to disperse community resources to the vulnerable patients in the ENC community.

During January, one of our busiest months, we had several culinary medicine sessions and were also able to support Dr. Florida at a local community health fair. This was a very innovative and insightful experience for Ella and me because we were able to see the impacts of culinary medicine outside of the outpatient hospital setting. We went to the local church to set up our booth and educate the community about healthy eating and anti-inflammatory foods. It was very eye-opening to see the amount of community members who had cardiovascular disease or were diabetic or prediabetic. In this way, Ella and I were able to share the resources that we implemented in our hospital with the community for free. We met a number of young mothers and their children who were interested in the healthy foods that we had to offer. I felt as if I was accomplishing one of the main goals of our project which involved creating multigenerational change within our community. I enjoyed working with the church, who facilitated our work. Dr. Hannah Florida has also been a staunch supporter of this initiative, and it was very helpful to have a physician backing us during the event.

During our inpatient experiences, we learned the extent of our participants’ desire to embark on their path to health. Seeing their determination towards bettering themselves, further ignited a spark within us to ensure we implemented the best intervention possible to meet our participants’ individual needs. In particular, we had a member, “Mr. Frank”, who, prior to joining our sessions, had never once tried a green smoothie in his life. After he participated in our culinary medicine session, he remarked that he deeply wanted to incorporate healthy foods into his diet, but they “needed more sweetness”. In order to lower the barriers to entry for Mr. Frank, we incorporated more fruits into the smoothies that we made with him. After one of our sessions, Mr. Frank delightfully took home the smoothie that we made as well as a new blender we were able to distribute to our patients for free, and remarked at how excited he was to finally incorporate a realistic change into his daily life. Mr. Frank’s enthusiasm towards changing his
habits and incorporating new ideas, inspired us to continue our program and meet each patient at their individual path.

Overall, this project was a hands-on and humbling way for me to be directly involved with bettering the lives of patients in the Eastern North Carolina community. I felt confident in utilizing the generous funding and support of the SEP program to uphold the mission of the Brody Scholars Program in providing high quality care to rural communities. This experience has significantly enriched my time in medical school, empowering me with the confidence to dedicate my life to caring for rural communities and underserved patients.

With Gratitude,

Vaishnavi Siripurapu.