The Institute of Medicine defines health literacy as the ability to obtain and understand basic health information and services to make informed decisions. It affects every patient in every setting. According to the Partnership for Clear Health Communication, literacy skills predict a person’s health more than age, income, employment status, education level or racial/ethnic group. National studies have found that the average reading level in this country is eighth grade, leaving more than 90 million Americans unable to adequately understand basic health information (which is generally written at a tenth grade level or higher). The results are poorer health and greater medical costs as low literacy often results in poor adherence to prescription instructions, lower use of preventative services, more hospitalizations and emergency room visits and poor control of chronic diseases. Even well-educated patients have trouble understanding medical jargon.

There are many obstacles to effective communication, which is a cornerstone of patient safety. This includes the smaller amount of time patients can spend with providers and the embarrassment that patients with low literacy skills feel. The majority of those with limited literacy skills have never told anyone, even family members, that they have trouble reading or understanding the written word. These are some behaviors that may indicate low literacy:

- Incomplete or inaccurate patient forms.
- Many missed appointments.
- Noncompliance with medication regimens.
- Lack of follow through with lab/imaging tests or referrals.
- Responses, when presented with written information such as:
  - “I forgot my glasses, I'll read this when I get home.”
  - “Can you read this to me? I forgot my glasses.”

Providers should assess the patient’s basic understanding before offering information using the following tips:

- Create an atmosphere of comfort and respect that encourages asking questions.
- Speak slowly and use plain or “living room” language (avoiding medical jargon).
- Show or draw pictures.
- Give information in small pieces & check for understanding using the “Teach Back” method.
- Re-write forms into low-literacy, reader-friendly formats or use other media formats (audio, video).

“One should aim not at being possible to understand, but at being impossible to misunderstand.”
Words From Our Executive Director

The crocuses have started to push their way up through the yielding ground as spring harkens the earth’s reawakening. The young seeds, with proper nurturance, will grow into their flowering potential. Spring, too, marks the beginning of our busiest season for our health careers exploration initiatives. In this same spirit, our programs are designed to nurture middle and high school students’ interests in exploring health care careers and to provide access to the resources that will help them to reach their greatest potential. These concurring happenings fill us with both anticipation and excitement. Please check our website www.cvahec.org for details about our upcoming programs.

Our hope is that by supporting these students to explore career possibilities within health care, to access needed resources and to overcome obstacles that might have impeded their success, they will stay or return to provide care to our rural and underserved areas and populations.

As always, please let us know if there are ways we can be more responsive to your practice, your constituents or to the communities we serve. We would love to hear from you.

Family Emergency Medical Information Form

The Vermont Department of Health’s Refugee Health Program, in conjunction with Alma Basic and Tenzin Polzom, UVM nursing students, is instituting a “Family Emergency Medical Sheet.” This form will facilitate the communication of critical medical information between refugee families and emergency first responders (e.g. fire, police, paramedics). Included on this sheet is each family member’s health conditions, allergies, language needs, and emergency contacts. This sheet is to be kept on the family’s refrigerator and in their wallets/purses. That way, when an emergency arises, first responders will have immediate access to the critical information they need.

This form is available for download on the Refugee Health webpage at http://healthvermont.gov/local/rhealth/refugee.aspx.

Health Careers Shadow Day

Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center, in collaboration with Fletcher Allen Health Care, is pleased to announce our upcoming Health Careers Shadow Day. Scheduled to take place on Wednesday, April 25, 2007 at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington, the Health Careers Shadow Day is an opportunity for high school students to explore a career in health care through a one-day shadowing experience.

The goal of the program is to encourage students, who might not otherwise have the opportunity, to consider a health care career. The day is designed to help students develop comfort in a health care environment, explore and strengthen skills and resources needed for health career development and to offer opportunities to shadow health care professionals in their work setting.

Students who are interested in a career in a health care field and want to explore the diversity of health careers were encouraged to apply.

Plans are already being developed for the 2007-2008 school year to again offer Health Careers Shadow Day at Fletcher Allen Health Care, Porter Medical Center and Northwestern Medical Center.
Healthier Living Workshops: Self-Management for People Living with Chronic Conditions

Did you know that 50% of Vermonters have one or more chronic conditions? These can include conditions such as asthma, heart disease, lung disease, diabetes, obesity, fibromyalgia, and osteoporosis. In Vermont, 70% of the $3.3 billion spent on health care is used to care for people living with chronic conditions. Chronic conditions are the most common and costly of health problems facing Vermonters, however they are also the most often preventable.

Vermont has launched the Vermont Blueprint for Health, a statewide initiative to provide Vermonters who have chronic conditions with the information, tools, and support they need to successfully manage their health. One of the Blueprint components are the Healthier Living Workshops. These workshops aim to empower individuals to manage chronic conditions through education, skill building, goal setting, problem solving, and mutual support. The workshops are the outcome of a ten year research study at Stanford University. The program has been documented to lower utilization of health services and to improve quality of life for participants.

To date, over 300 people have participated in the Healthier Living Workshops state-wide. Participants were surveyed at 6 and 12 months after completion of the workshop series. Workshop participants reported a significantly reduced number of visits to both the doctor’s office and the emergency room. Respondents reported feeling less discouraged by symptoms, more confident about managing their condition and maintaining their lifestyle. Participants also reported feeling more confident in understanding what medication they were taking and how to prevent further problems with their health condition.

Workshop topics include communicating with providers and family, managing medication, nutrition, exercise, stress management, and developing a weekly action plan. The Healthier Living Workshops offer an opportunity for patients, friends, and family to learn better self-management skills and to build a new support system. If you would like to make a referral or if you would like additional information sent to you, please call Julie Witherell at the Community Health Improvement Office at Fletcher Allen at 802-847-8929.

Vermont Loan Repayment Program Awards

Once again, Vermont’s legislature has demonstrated its commitment to the recruitment and retention of health care practitioners in underserved areas of the state through the Vermont Primary Care Loan Repayment Program. This program is funded by the State of Vermont, through the Vermont Department of Health. It is administered by the University of Vermont College of Medicine, Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Program. The loan repayment programs awards up to $20,000 per person, per year which can double with the inclusion of local or employer matches.

The purpose of the program is to ensure a stable and adequate supply of primary care providers to meet the health care needs of Vermonters. This year Champlain Valley Area Health Education Center distributed $105,000 to qualifying providers in the Champlain Valley. Qualifying providers include primary care physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, and psychiatrists.

This year the $105,000, along with a $7,500 carryover from last year, was given as fifteen awards—one award of $1,500, one award of $2,500, five awards of $5,000 each, one award of $7,500, one award of $8,000, three awards of $10,000 each, one award of $12,000 and two awards of $13,000 each to providers in our service area of Addison, Chittenden, Franklin, and Grand Isle counties. The only obligation to the recipients of the award is that the provider remains in practice in Vermont for the year (January 1, 2007—December 31, 2007) or the money needs to be returned. Each primary care provider can receive up to six years of awards.

In addition, CVAHEC distributed one additional award from the Freeman Foundation totaling $3,000. To qualify for a Freeman Foundation award, a provider must be a medical doctor in either primary or specialty care.
Health Careers Spotlight—Dietitian

In the Health Careers Spotlight we focus on a health career that is currently facing a shortage. The information in this article is compiled from the Health Careers Directory available on our web site at www.cvahec.org.

Dietitians plan nutrition programs for large groups such as hospitals and nursing facilities, and for individuals with special needs, such as people with diabetes or high blood pressure. They also educate people about the need for and ways to achieve proper nutrition. There are many specific areas of this field that work with particular population groups.

Employment of dietitians is expected to grow faster than average for all occupations through 2014 as a result of increasing emphasis on disease prevention through improved dietary habits. A growing and aging population will increase the demand for meals and nutritional counseling in nursing homes, schools, prisons, community health programs and home health care agencies.

The middle 50 percent of dietitians earn between $35,000 and $53,370 a year, depending on setting and experience. The highest salaries are found for those in consultation and business, food and nutrition management, education and research, community nutrition and clinical nutrition.

For those interested in a career as a dietitian, high school course work should include college prep classes in sciences, math and communication. Dietitians must obtain a bachelor’s degree from an accredited program and complete a supervised internship. They must also pass the Registered Examination for Dietitians to become a Registered Dietitian (RD).

For more information on a career as a dietitian or another health career, please visit the online Health Careers Directory at http://www.cvahec.org/documents/AHEC_Health_Careers.pdf.

An Interview with Jill Sullivan, RD
Dietitian at Fletcher Allen Health Care Nutrition Services

Jill Sullivan, RD, is a Registered Dietitian at Fletcher Allen Health Care Nutrition Services in Burlington, Vermont. Jill received her Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Miami and her Bachelor of Science degree in Dietetics from the University of Vermont.

We recently spoke with Jill to discuss her experiences working as a Registered Dietitian.

Q How did you become interested in becoming a Dietitian?
A Health and prevention has been a personal interest for a long time. I knew I wanted to engage in a career that I had a personal as well as professional interest in. I experienced the loss of a family member due to a stroke caused by hypertension. I believe this could have been prevented by better self care including better nutrition and weight control. This loss solidified my desire for a career in nutrition.

Q How long have you been working in your health career?
A I have been working as a Registered Dietitian for six years.

Q What other career alternatives did you consider?
A I originally earned a degree in English but was never quite sure what I wanted to do with it. After taking a few years off after graduating college, it became more clear to me that I was interested in nutrition.

Q Did any person influence your decision to become a Dietitian?
A Other than the experience of losing a loved one to a preventable disease, no other person had a strong influence.

Q What personal needs are satisfied by your occupation?
A Establishing relationships with patients and feeling like I have really helped a person is very satisfying. Seeing a person become empowered with knowledge and take charge of their health is very gratifying.

Q In what ways has your occupation changed you as a person?
A I think I have become a more patient and compassionate person. It has also inspired me to take better care of my health and to not take my good health for granted!

Q If you could have chosen any occupation (no limits) what would it be?
A Veterinary medicine is interesting to me. I enjoy animals very much and think it would be rewarding to treat animals, particularly less fortunate ones that end up in shelters.

Q If you didn't have to work, would you anyway? If not, what would you do?
A I would still work in some capacity, possibly working to improve nutrition in countries where undernourishment is problematic.

(Continued on page 5)
Interview with Jill Sullivan continued...

Q Describe the demands of your job...
A I work 20 hours per week since having a baby, and then work a few additional hours weekly as part of a behavioral weight control program I’m involved in. I work one weekend per month which involves covering the whole hospital population. This can be complex in that it requires being able to provide a nutrition consult on any potential patient and disease state. Most of the work I do involves weight management which can often be a sensitive subject for people. Being able to counsel patients in this area is challenging as some people are more ready than others to address their weight control problems. It requires a balance of sensitivity and directness.

Q What is a typical day for you?
A With my current work schedule no one day is typical because I work in different areas each day I work. One day I work in a bariatric surgery clinic seeing patients who are either preparing for obesity surgery, or patients who have already had surgery. Another day I counsel patients who are either referred by their physicians for medical nutrition therapy, or seek nutrition counseling on their own. I work one or two evenings per week with a psychologist who runs a behavioral weight management program. My work week involves working half a day at a rehabilitation facility that has a very varied patient population.

Q Do you supervise the work of others?
A I currently do not supervise the work of others.

Q What personal characteristics are desirable to be a good Dietitian?
A Being able to work well in a team is a helpful skill.

Q What special knowledge and skill does a person in this job need?
A After completing a degree in dietetics, an internship is required that usually lasts a year.

Q What are kinds of people do you work with? Coworkers, clients, patients...?
A My coworkers include physicians, nurses, and psychologists, mostly. The client and patient range is wide and varied, including pediatric patients to elderly, healthy people to critically ill patients.

Q What do you like best about your job and what aspects cause you the most frustration?
A I like the variety my job has as each day I’m working with a different population of patients and with a different group of coworkers. It can be frustrating working in a system that can limit a persons access to nutrition therapy. Not all medical diagnoses like obesity are covered by all insurances, therefore, some people who can really benefit from working with a dietitian do not have the means to do so.

Q What high school classes should be taken to prepare for a career as a Dietitian?
A Biology and chemistry would be helpful to prepare for the college requirements for a degree in nutrition or dietetics. Also, if a nutrition class is offered, this would be helpful.

Q What requirements exist, in addition to schooling—training, experience, certification, license to become a Dietitian?
A Ongoing education within the profession is required to maintain certification and licensure.

Q What are the career ladder possibilities in this field?
A Dietitians can advance their career in management and administration positions.

Q Can a person specialize within this field? Into what areas?
A It is possible to specialize. For example, there are dietitians that specifically work with renal patients. There are specific credentials a dietitian can earn such as a certified diabetes educator (CDE) to specialize within the profession.

Q What changes are occurring in this field?
A Generally I think there is more opportunity for dietitians given the obesity epidemic and greater range of treatment of obesity.

Q Can a person work flexible hours? Part or full time?
A Work hours are somewhat flexible. Since I work at a hospital, the hours are somewhat dictated by a hospital schedule. The consulting work I do is flexible, which is great.

Q Do you encounter any problems combining your job with your family life?
A I don’t have a problem combining all facets of my life. I’ve been fortunate to have been able to have a flexible schedule that allowed me to work part-time after the birth of my daughter. I also am able to do some consulting work in the evenings which fits in well with family life.

Q Do you have ample time for leisure activities?
A I do. Leisure time is a priority for me as I try to maintain a balance in my life. My current job and schedule leaves me with plenty of time to enjoy other interests.

Q What advice would you give someone who is planning to enter the Dietetics field?
A To research the educational opportunities and the job market in the area they would be planning to live. Internships can be limited potentially requiring someone to move.
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Vermont’s AHEC Program is a statewide network of the Northeastern VT AHEC, the Champlain Valley AHEC, the Southern Vermont AHEC, and the UVM College of Medicine.