Course name:
“Street Medicine: Operation Safety Net”

Periods offered:
Year-round

Slots available, per period:
Two to three slots, per period, as available

Visiting students accepted?
Yes

Course director:
James S. Withers, MD
Founder and Medical Director, Operation Safety Net and
Clinical Professor of Medicine, University of Pittsburgh School of Medicine
Operation Safety Net
249 South 9th Street, Second Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15203
Phone: 412.232.5739
Email: operationsafetynet@pmhs.org

Course student coordinator:
Renee E. Brown
Administrative Assistant
Operation Safety Net
249 South 9th Street, Third Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15203
Phone: 412.232.5739
Fax: 412.246.2988
Email: operationsafetynet@pmhs.org

Where to report:
Operation Safety Net
249 South 9th Street, Third Floor
Pittsburgh, PA 15203
Special permissions required: None

Course description:

This one-month, clinical elective focuses on the delivery of health care to individuals who sleep on the streets of Pittsburgh. The chronically street homeless population presents significant challenges in terms of access to care, continuity of care, cultural barriers, as well as a variety of medical issues. By working directly with the street homeless in the environment in which they live, students will see the health care system from the perspective of the persons we serve and learn to partner with this largely underserved population to improve their health.

Operation Safety Net® (OSN) is an award-winning medical outreach program of the Pittsburgh Mercy Health System. In keeping with the tradition of the Sisters of Mercy, walking teams visit the homeless persons in alleys, under bridges, along river banks, and other places they live. Follow-up care, including medical, psychiatric, behavioral, social, and housing services, are provided by a dedicated team of case management professionals. An inpatient consult service specializes in the interface of the street homeless population with the medical system.

To ensure quality and safety, student activities are supervised by the course director and by Operation Safety Net clinical professionals. A comprehensive orientation and written materials are provided on the first day of the rotation. There are two primary clinical activities:

- Monday through Friday, beginning at 10 a.m., students provide direct care to walk-ins at Operation Safety Net’s office, see hospital consults, visit the individuals we serve on the streets as well as in a variety of community-based settings, including Pittsburgh Mercy Family Health Center, shelters, drop-in centers, medical outreach vans, AA meetings, follow-up housing visits (house calls), etc.

- Additionally, Monday through Thursday evenings, from 7 to 10:30 p.m., students will either work on Operation Safety Net’s outreach medical van or walk with OSN street outreach teams to visit the unsheltered homeless. Each outreach team consists of an experienced clinician and an outreach worker. Total hours worked per day range from six to eight, depending upon activities.

This elective does not contain an on-call component.

Students work as part of a team and in collaboration other students, physicians, nurses, other health professionals, and social workers. Students will have daily care responsibilities with patients, some of whom will be continuity experiences. Reflective and feedback sessions occur weekly as well as at the middle and end of the rotation through meetings with course director.

Course objectives:

1. To participate in context-based health care with the street homeless population of Pittsburgh.

2. To participate in a multi-disciplinary health team and help the chronically homeless population to overcome barriers to health care.

3. To evaluate and manage medical conditions associated with the street homeless population.
4. To explore community resources that support the health and well-being of the homeless population.

5. To read relevant literature regarding homelessness, alternative health care delivery models, and service-oriented medicine.

6. To participate in reflective sessions with the preceptor and other participants.

Course requirements:

1. Students are required to work in a variety of health care and community settings, including the outdoors, the office, inpatient and outpatient clinical environments, the outreach medical van, homeless shelters, drop-in centers, and homes.

2. Students will be involved in patient care at a range of community sites, including the Operation Safety Net office, inpatient hospitals, outpatient health care settings, on the streets, and at a range of community settings as outlined in the course description.

3. Students will have clinical responsibilities and are required to be available Monday through Thursday evenings, from 7 p.m. until approximately 10:30 p.m.

4. There is no on-call responsibility. Hours per work day range from six to eight, depending on activities.

5. Students are required to complete assigned readings.

6. Students are required to participate in reflective and feedback sessions with the preceptor and others.

For more information, contact:

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