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Ingrid Aguiza, far left, accompanied by her mother, Elena Torres, has only praise for the care that Dr. Ethan Wiener of the pediatric mobile center in Hempstead has given her children Ingrid, 7 months, and Gabriel, 2.

In the Vanguard Of Pediatric Medicine

MEDICINE



'Continuity of Care' From the Doc in the RV

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IT WAS CLEAR that Ingrid Aguaiza liked her children's doctor.

"I won't take my children nowhere else," said the 28-year-old mother of four from Hempstead. "This is my doctor. I got this one," she said, patting Dr. Ethan Wiener's arm.

Wiener, a tall handsome man speaking fluent Spanish to Aguaiza's 7-month-old baby, Ingrid, and her 2-year-old son, Gabriel, suddenly seemed at loss for words.

"Now, now," he said, blushing a bit and turning away with a smile.

Aguaiza was confirming what only minutes before Wiener had been stressing: "This is their medical home," he said. "We really aim to be a comprehensive pediatric practice."

This is hardly a surprising goal for a pediatrician, except that Wiener works out of a mobile van, parked in a parking lot behind the Hagedorn Family Resource Center in Hempstead. Wiener is the associate medical director of the Pediatric Mobile Health Center, and he works five days a week in his mobile office, which resembles a large RV equipped with all the accoutrement of a medical practice.

The mobile center provides low-cost or free health care to children who otherwise might never see a doctor except in an emergency room. What's more surprising perhaps is that a doctor is available to their pediatric patients not just during the van's 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. hours but "24-7," as Wiener put it. Just like a typical fee-paying practice, somebody is on call to answer a parent's anxious, 3 a.m. questions — which is exactly what Wiener did when Aguaiza's daughter became dangerously dehydrated and, after several phone calls, he urged her to go an emergency room.

Until recently, the van has served children only in Hempstead but begin-



Wiener talks with Beatriz Martinez about her daughter Isabella. Martinez's husband, Edwin Mendez, noted how the staff also checked Isabella's development in other areas by observing her drawing skills.

ning this month it is parking Tuesdays and Thursdays at its Hempstead site and Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays outside of Public School 19 in Corona.

"This goes a long way to filling an enormous need for primary care in an underserved population," said Dr. James Fagin, medical director of the mobile unit and chief of pediatrics at North Shore University Hospital in Manhasset.

Wiener said more than half of his patients are from Spanish-speaking families and are recent immigrants. About 70 percent of the children have no private health insurance and most are undocumented aliens who may not have seen a doctor in years, Wiener said.

In New York State, all children, regardless of whether they are uninsured or undocumented, can get health care, paid for through the state's Child Health Plus program. Part of the mobile unit's mission is to create a zone of safety so that parents can feel free to bring their children in without fear of legal repercussions. For many, a visit to the van is a family's first step toward giving their children a new life: With proper medical checkups and shots, they can enroll their children in school.

"Word gets around," said Damaris Diaz, the unit's social worker. Most of the more than 700 patients the van has handled since its opening last October have heard about the unit by word of mouth, she said, and all of the staff work hard to make it easy for parents to bring their children. Parents can make appointments or they can just show up as walk-ins. And the van's somewhat cramped quarters — the feeling is like being in the cabin of a boat — seem to make people feel more at ease, rather than less.

"This is the antithesis of a bureaucratic facility," Fagin said. "We are particularly proud of the way people are treated here."

Diaz's job is to provide counseling to parents and children who face, in addition to all the normal stresses of rais-

ing children or growing up, huge economic, cultural, language — and perhaps legal — barriers.

The staff, including Mary Huang, a nurse practitioner, Gladis Deleon, a medical assistant, and Vincent Califano, the van's driver who is also a trained emergency medical technician, also pay attention to a child's social and intellectual growth. Every kid is given a book — to keep — that is age-appropriate or something to draw and one of the staff observes how well the child seems to do with the task.

The staff is part of North Shore-Long Island Jewish Health System, and the mobile unit is paid for by grants from the state and a private donation from Computer Associates chief executive Sanjay Kumar. In addition, the Manhattan-based Children's Health Fund, a national nonprofit group, has been instrumental in giving

guidance on how to outfit this and 15 other such vans nationwide.

The president and co-founder of Children's Health Fund, Dr. Irwin Redlener, said he came up with the idea for a mobile medical unit in 1986 when he and singer-songwriter Paul Simon, the fund's other co-founder, were visiting a welfare hotel in New York City for the homeless and were appalled by the "horrendous, squalid" conditions and obvious lack of medical care for the children living there. The first mobile van that served the welfare hotels was up and running by 1987, he said. Since then, the concept and vans have spread to 11 states and the District of Columbia.

From the outset, Redlener said, the idea was that the mobile van was not going to be all that mobile: That is, the van and its staff were going to be there to provide "a good semblance of conti-

nuity of care, with regularly scheduled hours and 7-days-a-week, 24-hours-a-day backup," Redlener said.

The beauty of a mobile van is that it avoids the overhead and maintenance costs of a fixed site and it can move with the population that needs it most. Nevertheless, Redlener said, he still sees the medical van as a stopgap, not as a permanent solution to providing health care to underserved children. But until health resources are less "randomly" distributed, the vans are "the vanguard," he said.

The 15 other vans — two-thirds of which are in poor urban areas and one-third in rural — serve patients similar to those in Hempstead, said Lynn Seim, senior director of the national program for the Children's Health Fund: poor, often non-English speaking, often undocumented families. But the concerns of the parents are not much different than those of the average parent, Seim said.

"I think parents are concerned about their children and they want to get them in school and do their best for them and one's economic situation doesn't change that," she said.

That was clear with Edwin Mendez of Freeport. He was with his stepchild, Isabella, 5, who wailed while she got a round of shots needed for her to enter kindergarten.

"The doctor paid attention," Mendez said. "They explained things very clearly. They wanted to see how she draws."

His wife, Beatriz, shifted their newborn daughter, Michelle, in her arms. Gesturing to his baby and looking at his wife, Mendez said, "Maybe we will bring her back."



Newsday Photos / John Paraskevas

Dr. Ethan Wiener immunizes 5-year-old Isabella Garcia of Hempstead in preparation for kindergarten.



Ingrid Aguiza gets checked as her brother Gabriel, held by his grandmother, Elena Torres, waits his turn at the mobile health center, which will visit Corona as well as Hempstead.