



Phoenix doctor has unorthodox method of providing care

by **Luci Scott** - Aug. 21, 2011 08:47 PM

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Dr. Randy Christensen has coaxed cockroaches out of children's ears, counseled teenage rape victims and helped pregnant women protect their fetuses from birth defects, all from a bus that rambles through the streets of metropolitan Phoenix for up to 13 hours a day.

Christensen, a pediatrician, treats homeless children and young adults in his medical clinic housed in a 38-foot Winnebago.

In 11 1/2 years of operating the vehicle, called Big Blue, Christensen, who is on the staff at Phoenix Children's Hospital, has helped patients from newborns to age 24.

This year, he is seeing more patients than ever - an estimated 5,000 in 2011, up from about 3,000 in 2009. He has provided cough and cold medicine to mothers recently evicted and asthma and diabetes medicines to those suffering from the chronic diseases

Taking tiny cockroaches out of ears happens at least once a year, he said, because the patient has been sleeping on the floor or lying on sleeping bags. Baby roaches like to crawl into the dark, warm, moist climate of ears.

He has helped young people with maladies ranging from ear infections to heroin addiction. And he sees many victims of rape.

"The vast majority of teen women we see on the streets have been forced into what we call survival sex," said Christensen, 44, who lives in Phoenix. "They need money, they need food, they haven't eaten for days."

The severity of the nation's economic situation in the past few years has cut into his funding but increased the need for his services. His van has been in Mesa, Tempe and central and south Phoenix, and Christensen wants to move out to spots in the West Valley.

"There's much more demand," he said. "There are more homeless kids coming since the economy started to be hit hard, but since 2006, we've seen the demand rise to what we think are unprecedented rates."

Along with the increased numbers, he has seen more mental-health issues that are exacerbated by the decrease in funding and services overall.

"I don't know if we're getting better at making the diagnosis or more people are coming to us because there's nowhere else to go," he said.

Reducing risks

On Aug. 2, the clinic was parked on Seventh Street east of Mill Avenue in Tempe.



Michael Crow/The Arizona Republic

Dr. Randy Christensen talks with Jenny Rich, 20, inside the Crew's Health Mobile in Tempe.

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Dr. Randy Christensen

Lives: Phoenix.

Undergraduate degree: Sociology from the University of Arizona.

Medical degree: M.D. and Master's in Public Health from Tufts University in Boston.

Wife: Amy Christensen, also a pediatrician.

Lessons learned

Dr. Randy Christensen's recently published book, "Ask Me Why I Hurt," narrates his life as a mobile doctor and traces his personal growth.

The book, whose title came from a patient's bracelet, not only narrates his life as a mobile doctor but traces his personal growth. Among lessons he learned is the importance of communication with patients and the community and within personal relationships.

"Many of the stories I tell in the book, many we encounter on a day-to-day basis, are incredibly traumatic or dramatic," he said. "I would come home and I would buy that whole a toy here. I wouldn't talk to my wife about it." The book tells of patients, including one who was seconds from dying from a blood infection caused by untreated pneumonia. The doctor and nurse in the van gave him life in the nick of time.

Among the patients was Jenny Rich, 20, who was four months pregnant and asking for prenatal vitamins with folic acid, which, the doctor said, helps prevent certain types of birth defects. Ideally, she would have begun taking the vitamins earlier, he said.

"A simple medicine like that has so many positive benefits," he said. The pills reduce the risk of spina bifida, a birth defect that can affect the lower back and spinal cord, potentially causing paralysis. One hundred pills cost \$20. The alternative could be tens of thousands of dollars of medical costs over a lifetime.

Jenny sleeps in various places.

"I couch hop," said the mother of a 4-year-old son who is with his dad and a 5-month-old daughter whom Jenny hopes to retrieve from the custody of Child Protective Services.

Team of professionals

Christensen, the medical director of Big Blue, leads a team of 11 professionals, including another pediatrician, three nurses, a nurse practitioner, a program director and four case managers, including a financial specialist, plus medical students from around the nation.

The clinic costs \$1.25 million a year, but he says it actually saves the medical system money since many patients would otherwise appear in emergency rooms. The clinic is funded by several sources, including grants and federal and private funds. Salaries are paid by Children's Hospital.

The clinic gets some reimbursement from AHCCCS, but the doctor says it's been just "a drop in the bucket."

The van, also called the Crews'n Healthmobile, was begun by Children's Hospital and HomeBase Youth Services with the help of the Children's Health Fund in New York.

The van houses seven computers, five of which are running constantly. The 2007 bus, which costs \$350,000, is the third one, and the staff wonders how long it will last. It runs up to 13 hours a day, and the generator is limping along after 2,385 hours.

On this thinly insulated bus with its heaving generator, Christensen and his team save countless lives. Some patients with diabetes have been taken directly to the emergency room and then to the intensive-care unit.

"We've seen a couple of kids with skull fractures," he recalled. "If they didn't get help, these children would have had really bad outcomes, and death is one of the possibilities. . . . We call 911 relatively frequently."

'A living memory'

His life is filled with poignant stories.

Christensen, who received a CNN Hero Award in 2007, remembered the time homeless children found a dog in a dumpster at Seventh Street and McDowell Road.

"Most homeless kids like to keep animals," he said. "It's part of the unconditional love they're searching for."

The children made the responsible decision to give up the dog, and they gave it to the doctor.

A homeless girl would return time and again to the van to ask about the dog and see pictures of it. The girl's life gradually improved, and the dog became a big part of the doctor's family.

"Every time I go home and see my dog, it's a living memory of this one girl, a living memory of success. . . .," he said. "These kids are so worth the time and effort."