



# Opening Lines



The Division of General Internal Medicine at MGH is a very large organization. Hundreds of nurses, physicians, and other clinical, administrative and research staff support the work that we do across our core missions. The quarterly issues of our newsletter are one part of a larger effort to create a sense of belonging to this large organization by celebrating the people and programs under the DGIM roof. As an organization, we are the sum of many amazing individual success stories and group projects. In this issue, we recognize this diversity and talent by featuring profiles of several of our members and the accomplishments they have recently achieved. These stories are truly inspirational and remind us that there is much to be proud of in our organization. While

such stories do not negate some of the real challenges that we face in our daily work, these stories do demonstrate that we are well positioned to address these challenges by calling on the skills of our members. These stories also demonstrate that the impact of our work represents not just the quality of the front line clinical care we deliver but also our ability to address the upstream social determinants of health that impact both our patients and co-workers. This is a theme that was recently highlighted in an article in the American Journal of Public Health, celebrating the landmark work that John Stoeckle led 50 years ago, linking the social and clinical care of patients under one program. His legacy can be seen in several of the stories in this issue of our newsletter. Enjoy!  
- Josh Metlay, Chief, DGIM

## Award Commemorates Extraordinary Path to Success for Denisa Gace

In October, Denisa Gace, DO, received the Distinguished Alumni Award from Iowa Central Community College (ICCC) at the school's annual Hall of Fame Banquet. For Dr. Gace, a physician in the Hospital Medicine Unit, receiving the award was a pleasant surprise and an undoubtedly deserved commendation. Though Dr. Gace was only enrolled at ICCC for a relatively short period of time, her time spent there played a very important role on her improbable journey to MGH. Dr. Gace's story is a truly remarkable quintessence of the American Dream. On her path to MGH, Dr. Gace conquered countless obstacles through the sheer power of will and an indefatigable work ethic.

A native of Albania, Dr. Gace was a teenager when she emigrated to the United States as part of an academic exchange program. While it was difficult to leave her family, Dr. Gace cited the social climate of Albania as a driving force. At the time, Albania was still reeling from decades under the rule of a brutal communist dictatorship. Though things were improving, Dr. Gace was still troubled by life in Albania. "I saw disparities entwined in every aspect of the social fabric through state sanctioned rules and regulations" said Dr. Gace. She was particularly struck by the restrictions endured by her mother, while her father was free to do as he pleased. Seeking a future free of such restrictions, Dr. Gace journeyed to the United States.



*Dr. Gace with her Distinguished Alumni Award at ICCC's Hall of Fame Banquet*

Dr. Gace's exchange program placed her in Iowa, where she quickly learned adjusting to life in a new culture would not be easy. Dr. Gace struggled mightily to adjust, and while one might assume the language barrier or adjusting to life in an American high school would be especially troublesome, it was her difficulties with basic household chores that stuck out to Dr. Gace. While initially vexing, Dr. Gace came to learn valuable lessons from those chores, particularly cleaning the house. "I learned that if you are diligent in any task, however trivial it might seem, you can achieve meaning in it" said Dr. Gace, "it taught me the work ethic that I had to develop if I wanted to be successful in this country."

Armed with this work ethic and a sense of

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# HMU Committee Strives to Spread Happiness

The Division of General Internal Medicine's Hospital Medicine Unit is pleased to announce its very own Happiness Committee has recognized Jennifer Yobaccio as a Happiness Hero!

The Hospital Medicine Unit Happiness Committee was originally founded to promote optimism, resilience, and camaraderie. In September 2015, the committee created an award which seeks to recognize these virtues amongst our colleagues here at MGH. The award identifies those who inspire joy, and convey enthusiasm throughout the day! The DGIM generously funded a certificate and a custom-designed Happiness Hero pin to mark the occasion.

As our inaugural winner, and just in time for the holi-

day season, Jennifer Yobaccio was recognized by many within the unit as a Happiness Hero! For the past 3 years, Jennifer has worked on Ellison 12 as an Operations Asso-

ciate. She not only excels in her duties and daily responsibilities, but is also a compassionate liaison between our hard working staff members, families, and patients. "She goes

well out of her way to make everyone's day easier and brighter. Always with a smile, always welcoming! A delight to work with!" said one nomination. "Amazing attitude, team player, always courteous," said another. Her joyful spirit, and unique ability to make people smile is what makes Jennifer an ideal recipient.

In your travels around MGH, please be mindful of Happiness Heroes all around you, as this distinction will be awarded quarterly. And if you are on Ellison 12, make sure to congratulate Jennifer on this wonderful accomplishment!



Jennifer Yobaccio, center, With her colleagues from Ellison 12

# DGIM Researchers Study Unmet Needs

A study conducted in two MGH primary care practices has identified specific unmet socioeconomic needs that can interfere with the quality of care patients receive. As part of the study, the research team set up a pilot program to help patients access local services that can meet those needs.

"Rather than focus on a single need patients may have, as earlier studies have done, we sought to comprehensively assess patients' needs and determine how they relate to illness management and the use of health services," says Seth Berkowitz, MD, MPH, lead author of the report published in *BMJ Quality & Safety*. "While there has been a lot of interest in addressing social determinants of health, we haven't known much about the specific issues faced by patients in particular situations."

From October 2013 through April 2014, all patients seen at Internal Medicine Associates (IMA) or the Bulfinch Medical Group (BMG) were asked to complete a form indicating whether they would like to receive help with needs like paying for healthy food, prescription medicine or utility bills; finding a job, receiving assistance with housing or other financial needs. Patients asking for help were referred to advocates from Health Leads, a

local organization that connects patients with community services. The advocates were located in the practices and could either see patients the same day or arrange for later follow up.

Advocates worked with the patients to define their needs specifically, to identify services that could help meet those needs and to connect patients with those programs. The research team also investigated how these

unmet needs related to health conditions and other information noted in medical records.

During the seven-month study period, 416 patients indicated one or more unmet needs and enrolled in the Health Leads program. The most commonly reported unmet needs were difficulty affording health care – including prescription drugs – food or utilities. Conditions like depression, diabetes and hyperten-

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Dr. Seth Berkowitz

# Happy Holidays in the DGIM

Once again, the holiday spirit was rampant at the annual DGIM Administration Holiday Party. Some truly outrageous entries made the ugly sweater contest the cause of much laughter. In particular, Claire McGlave, Ethan Borre, and Tim Gomperts each had top-notch holiday get-ups and took home prizes. For the third straight year, the Yankee Swap was highlighted by the "Travelocity Gnome", as we have dubbed him. When all was said and done, the gnome ended up with Josh Metlay, MD, who also



*Ugly Sweater contest winners: (L to R) Ethan Borre (Ugliest Sweater), our judge Jessica Bannister with Clair McGlave (Best Special Effects) and Tim Gomperts (Best Bling) with Chief Josh Metlay.*



happens to be its original owner. All in all, a great time was had by everyone and the party was a great way to cap off another successful year within the DGIM.



# Award Commemorates Extraordinary Path to Success for Denisa Gace

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purpose, Dr. Gace sought to enroll in college. Admirable in her self-reliance, Dr. Gace had long since decided that she would not ask her parents for any financial support while in the U.S. As a result, money was scarce for Dr. Gace and her options for higher education were limited. Nevertheless, she was undeterred and remained steadfast in her desire to attend college.

Unable to afford a four-year college, Dr. Gace enrolled at ICCC as a Microbiology student. To help pay for her education, Dr. Gace took on jobs in her host family's cake business and as a household cleaner. Despite her demanding schedule, Dr. Gace flourished at ICCC. Dr. Gace learned to be confident in herself and benefitted greatly from relationships she developed with faculty members. In particular, Dr. Gace developed a strong relationship with her advisor, Patty Croonquist. Dr. Gace credits Ms. Croonquist as a role model from early on and cherishes the relationship that they have maintained long after she graduated from ICCC.

Upon graduating from ICCC, Dr. Gace continued her education at Drake University. By this point, Dr. Gace's hard work had earned her scholarships that helped defray her tuition costs. Yet and still, Dr. Gace continued to balance life as a college student with

an ambitious work schedule. While completing her degree at Drake, Dr. Gace worked as a Laboratory Technician and also took on evening shifts as a Microbiologist at hospitals in and around Des Moines. Dr. Gace capably juggled her many responsibilities and graduated from Drake with a degree in Cellular and Molecular Biology.

While Dr. Gace was overcoming the odds in the US, her family was having trouble back in Albania. Albania was beset by a crumbling economy, which manifested itself in a health-care system that was haphazard and inconsistent. Dr. Gace's sister was stricken with an illness, later determined to be vasculitis, which doctors struggled to correctly diagnose. The hardships endured by Dr. Gace's loved ones,

*“I think my story should provide inspiration to the individuals who due to low income are unable to afford 4-year college right away, to the foreign students who face many language and culture obstacles and, most importantly, to everyone who likes to dream big and work hard”*

her sister in particular, motivated Dr. Gace to study public health.

Dr. Gace enrolled in the MPH program at Des Moines University. As Dr. Gace gained the theoretical knowledge of public health, it sparked an interest in clinical medicine. Dr. Gace decided that medical school would be the next step on her improbable path to success. True to form, Dr. Gace took on a full-time job in addition to her master's program so she could save money for medical school.

Dr. Gace's acceptance to the University of New England Medical School was something of a turning point. “All the difficulties that I had faced for these many years seemed so distant” said Dr. Gace. Despite the many years of training ahead of Dr. Gace, medical school afforded her a semblance of clarity and calmness.

After finishing her medical school studies, Dr. Gace continued her training at North Shore Medical Center before ultimately ending up at MGH in the Hospital Medicine Unit within the DGIM. Given everything she's accomplished, one would be hard pressed to find a more deserving recipient of ICCC's Distinguished Alumni Award. Dr. Gace is the literal embodiment of the American Dream.

“I think my story should provide inspiration to the individuals who due to low income are unable to afford 4-year college right away, to the foreign students who face many language and culture obstacles and, most importantly, to everyone who likes to dream big and work hard” said Dr. Gace.



*Dr. Gace laughs joyously during her acceptance speech*

## Researchers Study Unmet Needs

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sion were more prevalent among patients with unmet needs, and those individuals were more likely to be frequent users of hospital emergency departments and to miss scheduled clinic appointments. In patients with conditions like diabetes or elevated cholesterol levels, those with unmet needs were more likely to have trouble controlling risk factors.

The services with which patients were most frequently connected provided assistance with food, utility payments or energy costs, prescription drugs and health insurance. At the end of the study period, 62% of the identified needs either were met or patients indicated no longer needing help. In 4% of cases needs were still unmet, and in 34%, the patients were lost to follow up. Relationships between unmet needs and health issues often were clear – such as food access and diabetes control or transportation difficulties and missed clinic appointments – although the study was not long enough to determine whether accessing the services reduced the problems.

Berkowitz says, “Unmet needs are so common in the U.S. – one-third of American adults with a chronic illness have trouble affording food, medication or both – that issues like this will come up in almost any practice. If practices are willing, programs designed to link patients to basic resources could be relatively easy to generalize.” The Health Leads program continues to be offered in the IMA and BMG practices and has been expanded to Women's Health Associates. MGH co-authors of the report are senior author Steven Atlas, MD, MPH, Clemens Hong, MD, MPH, and Carine Traore, MPH, of the Division of General Internal Medicine.

# Pages: Notes from the DGIM Writer in Residence

Lipi Roy

Guest Columnist

## Resolutions

*New Year's resolutions often involve diet and exercise. But this January, DGIM physician Lipi Roy MD, MPH is thinking about other kinds of self-improvement--and what she can learn from her work with homeless patients.—Suzanne Koven*

How many of us resolved to start the new year by mastering the burpee? Or making kale smoothies?

Some opt for a different kind of renewal.

My pediatrician friend, Bill, doesn't focus on specific goals but, rather, "to better myself and live positively every day." My transfusion medicine friend, Christine, wants to "spend time on my long-term value plan...to do things that build me up to reach my dreams and goals."

As medical professionals, self-care is clearly important to us. "Practice what you preach," right? But it's challenging for doctors burdened with long hours and saddled with seemingly endless pages, paperwork, clinical messages and emails. Or for nurses working as fast as they can but still needing to placate patients who've been "waiting forever." Unbridled tension can sadly – yet very easily – lead to self-medication with a drink, or four. Or

swallowing that painkiller that's been lying around since the tooth extraction. Or taking it out on the kids, or colleagues.

Maybe we need to make change by taking a step back and reassessing what's important in life. Perhaps our new beginning starts with making a slight adjustment in our schedule? Or waking up a little earlier to meditate for 20 minutes? Or going to dinner with friends to share, vent, and laugh?

If working the last four years as a doctor to Boston's homeless population has taught me anything, it is that life is short and can change on a dime. I have patients who have PhDs and law degrees who arrived at their current predicament through a series of misfortunes combined with some bad decision-making. I don't pass judgement because I now know this can

happen to anyone.

My resolution is to observe and learn from my patients' resilience, and apply it to every aspect of my life. In spite of my incessant complaints about the late and packed T, I will try to appreciate how lucky I am, and acknowledge that taking a subway from my warm apartment to a well-heated clinic to a full-time job caring for patients--and even sweating on a treadmill--are privileges that not many have. Happy 2016!



Would you like to share a story from your DGIM experience here, or have a private consultation about a manuscript or about writing in general? Contact me at [skoven@mg.harvard.edu](mailto:skoven@mg.harvard.edu)

## Karen Mejia Wins the Ernesto Gonzalez Award

Ten years ago, Ernesto González, MD, MGH dermatologist, was recognized with an award for Outstanding Service to the Latino Community. The award, later renamed in his honor, has since celebrated a decade's worth of MGHers who have made exceptional contributions to improving the experience of Latino patients, families, visitors and employees.

Karen L. Mejia, a community health worker at the MGH Chelsea HealthCare Center, was selected out of 19 nominees as the winner of this year's prestigious award. Mejia was honored at a Sept. 29 ceremony at the Paul S. Russell, MD Museum of Medical History and Innovation.

"It is a testimony to the virtues of empathy and good Samaritanism that we had so many candidates this year," said González, who presented the award. "The award goes to a person who has demonstrated outstanding rigor, an amazing devotion to serve others and behavior beyond the call of duty."

When an unprecedented number of unaccompanied minors began to arrive in Chelsea in October 2014, Mejia made a career shift so she could better help these children. Many have come from Central America and escaped gang violence, abuse, poverty and lack of educational opportunities. According to her nomination, Mejia, who emigrated from Honduras as a teenager, helps these families in countless ways – including supporting families who register as MGH patients,



Karen Mejia & Ernesto Gonzalez, MD

making connections for them within the Chelsea Public School system and at city hall, running errands and also working to help ensure the safety of the children and teens in the community. Her colleagues say the scope of Mejia's selfless responsibilities is endless.

"Seventeen years ago I was one of those children who arrived in this country with my hopes not too high" said Mejia. "I am humbled to be able to help in some way to give these children a better future."

### MGH DIVISION OF GENERAL INTERNAL MEDICINE



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## Guerrier Earns Second AMMP Scholarship

Thaisha Guerrier, a member of the Hospital Medicine Unit, was awarded a scholarship by the Association of Multicultural Members of Partners (AMMP) for the second time. AMMP is committed to the advancement, retention, recruitment and development of multicultural professionals into leadership roles across the MGH and Partners. In this capacity, AMMP awards scholarships to help members pursue education and training.



Thaisha Guerrier, along with her scholarship award