

Free clinic is pressed by patient needs

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The increasing-by-the-minute crowd is spilling over into a second waiting room at the free monthly walk-in medical clinic off West Market Street — even though doctors aren't scheduled to see patients for another half-hour.

"They don't deny me because I don't have insurance," said Inam Eltyib of Greensboro, who came an hour early and had been referred to the volunteer-run Al-Aqsa health clinic by a friend who had been here before.

The grass-roots health clinic on South Walnut Circle, which was originally open just the first Saturday of the month, now includes the third Saturday. Organizers hope that with enough donations and volunteers, the clinic could open every Saturday.

"When we opened it, we grew faster than what we were thinking," said Amal Khmour, one of the clinic's founding organizers, who also is a cancer survivor. "God is making more doors open so we can help people."

Al-Aqsa patients are seen at the clinic by area medical doctors who volunteer their time. Those who weigh patients or check their blood pressure could be a nurse at a hospital or off-duty emergency medical technician or student studying to go into medicine — all volunteers who help keep the clinic running.

"You just have to have that feeling in your heart, that you want to give back to your community," said Dr. Fozia Khan, an internal medicine physician in Burlington and one of the clinic's organizers.

As people have learned of the clinic, which was founded by volunteers from the area's Islamic community, it has also attracted additional volunteers and joined the Guilford Community Care Network. That allowed another day to see patients at the clinic.

The care network allows them patient referrals for the uninsured and people whose incomes are up to 225 percent of the federal poverty level, for special services such as ultrasounds and access to primary care physicians and medicine.

Brian Ellerby, chairman of the network of safety providers, applauds the language barriers that Al-Aqsa helps those in need overcome. But his enthusiasm is tempered by the fact that the network struggles to meet everyone's needs.

"This may sound like a wonderful thing that is occurring and for those receiving help it is, but one of the things we are running up against is that the demand for services ... outstrips the ability for the network to meet that need," Ellerby said. "We are consistently struggling from a financial standpoint."

Al-Aqsa continues to look for resources as well.

"In February, we just have a box of medicine, and now you can see the progress," said pharmacist Salwa Zarrouk, who leads the clinic's pharmacy. However, while she has lots of samples of some medicines, she has none of the others that people might need. The goal is to send patients home without having to get a prescription that they do not have the money to fill at pharmacies — a concern the new partnership will help ease.

Also, the space at 108 S. Walnut Circle has been temporarily donated until someone leases it. Organizers are looking for something more permanent, but it, too, would have to be donated. A new building would also accommodate any dentists and ophthalmologists who would like to volunteer as part of the clinic.

Many of those waiting to be seen here Saturday, where magazines in the waiting room are in Arabic and English, have come because of aggravated existing medical conditions, or the coughing and sneezing or other aches.

"Some people I know by name now," said volunteer Camille McCorkle, a high school teacher who hands out the paperwork to people signing in — with 14-year-old Hebbah Sayed helping to translate. "But there are always new people."

Those who sign up between 10 a.m. and noon are seen the same day. More recently, the patient load has increased with people who are non-Muslims, have lost their jobs and can't afford medications.

"A lady came in who had a history of breast cancer and she had lost her insurance and her husband had lost his job, so they didn't have any insurance," Khan said. "She didn't have her medicine and was even debating whether to go through chemotherapy or not. It breaks your heart."

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WANT TO KNOW MORE?

What: Al-Aqsa free medical clinic, 108 S. Walnut Circle

When: First and third Saturdays. Sign in from 10 a.m. to noon.

Information: To make donations or learn more about the clinic, call 350-1642.