

## Arranging Surgery for the Uninsured

Sponsor: Operation Access  
Location: San Francisco, CA

Where would a non-English-speaking laborer with no health insurance go to have a hernia repaired? Too often, the answer is nowhere: the legions of working poor earn too much to qualify for Medicaid but can't afford a luxury like surgery. Those who don't speak English don't know where to go or how to seek help, so they soldier on, disabled and in pain. In the San Francisco Bay area, such an individual would have an option. Through Operation Access, his hernia could be repaired for free, he would be able to communicate with caregivers through an interpreter, and he could return to work quickly, his health restored.

The San Francisco-based not-for-profit is a matchmaker of sorts among 60 community clinics, 225 medical volunteers and 13 hospitals in seven Bay Area counties. It screens patients referred from the clinics for both medical and financial criteria, identifies surgical teams and hospitals that can perform outpatient procedures, then schedules operations and pre- and post-surgical appointments, and, if needed, arranges for interpreters.

Founded nine years ago, Operation Access is the brainchild of two Bay Area surgeons, who saw public hospitals stretched to their limits and steadily rising numbers of uninsured unable to pay for basic surgical procedures. Since then, it has arranged for about 900 surgeries and saved the public health system an estimated \$3 million.

From the beginning, hospitals have been essential in supporting the program. Kaiser Permanente, San Francisco Medical Center was the pilot site, and five other Kaiser Foundation hospitals now participate. Along the way, "they've been instrumental in helping us recruit other hospitals. They make it easier for colleagues to see how the whole thing works," says Operation Access executive director Betty Hong. San Francisco General Hospital and St. Rose Hospital quickly followed suit; Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital joined in 2000.

Sutter Health came on board in 2000 and more than 100 Operation Access surgeries have since taken place at its four participating hospitals. "We see it as a unique example of how collaboration between the public and private sectors can work to the benefit of an entire community," says Cyndi Kettmann, senior vice president of public affairs for the Sacramento-based system.

Each hospital and volunteer interfaces differently with the program. Some commit to a certain number of surgeries each month, others do so quarterly; some offer operating room time on Saturdays, others, during the week. Operation Access collaborates closely with all parties to the benefit of needy and appreciative patients. "They're so grateful. Some have waited for such a long time," Hong says.

**THE PROBLEM:** Uninsured patients can't afford surgery.

**THE PLAYERS:** Operation Access, six Kaiser Foundation Hospitals, four Sutter Health hospitals, San Francisco General Hospital, St. Rose Hospital, Santa Rosa Memorial Hospital.

**THE PLAN:** Coordinate efforts of hospitals, physicians and clinics to arrange free surgical procedures and related care.

**THE RESULTS:** Approximately 900 surgeries performed, saving the public health system an estimated \$3 million; an average patient satisfaction score of 4.6 on a 5-point scale.

**Caption**

Operation Access executive director Betty Hong says some hospitals commit to a certain number of surgeries per month, others offer operating room time on Saturdays. Each hospital interfaces differently with the program.

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