

Manning the front lines of community health care

Led by pediatrician Sue Chan, Oakland's Asian Health Services celebrates 35 years

By Alice Chen

What would you do if the mother of a sick baby came to you overwhelmed, obviously on the brink of depression? Would you quickly write a prescription and send her on her way? Or would you do the unthinkable: take the child in for the weekend to give the mother a break? Sue Chan, M.D., a pediatrician at Asian Health Services, did both.

"That's who she is — very dedicated, principled," said Karen Mori, an RN who hired Chan decades ago as the first paid doctor at the AHS, a community health center that serves low-income immigrants and refugees in the heart of Oakland's Chinatown.

Now celebrating its 35th anniversary, the AHS started as an all-volunteer group that offered two days of clinic a week, but has grown into an organization that provides primary, dental and mental health services in 10 languages to 20,000 patients a year. Nearly 90 percent of the patients are non-English speakers, one-third are uninsured and 98 percent are below the poverty level.

Chan, who's served as the medical director of AHS, is an extremely dedicated physician who helped set the tone of the organization.

One reason Chan is so passionate about AHS is that her background is quite similar to many of the immigrants served by the clinic. She was born in Shanghai during World War II, a time so bitter that her family had difficulty getting adequate nutrition. When the war ended, they moved to the United States, where her father had great difficulty finding adequate work, despite his Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Michigan.

"He was given almost nothing [in terms of pay]," she recalled. Meanwhile her mother, who had studied chemistry at Shanghai University, was hugely embarrassed to hold a job where she stood for up to 10 hours a day stuffing vegetables into cans.

Chan had several uncles, cousins and grandparents who were doctors, but she never considered the field because she didn't think she was smart enough. But when she entered college, she participated in a work-study program that spurred her to perform research at Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and Jefferson Medical College. At Jefferson, she met an Indian surgeon who encouraged her. "You can do [medicine] if you have dedication and an interest in helping people," she recalled him saying.

The surgeon took Chan to an operating theater to observe a caesarean section. Blood gushed up, almost hitting the glass ceiling. "This looks pretty interesting," she thought.



Top: Sue Chan, M.D., makes the rounds at the bustling Oakland practice, still finding time to share a laugh with colleagues. Bottom: Chan has dedicated her medical career to providing care to the under-served Asian population in the heart of Oakland's Chinatown.



After college, Chan went to Hong Kong and Taiwan for 18 months to study Chinese and figure out her life's direction. When she returned, Chan decided to attend medical school at Ohio State University, then completed her internship at the University of Chicago and embarked on a pediatrics residency back at Ohio State.

She then relocated to the Bay Area to earn a Masters of Public Health at UC Berkeley. The Bay Area was the first place (aside from Asia) where she wasn't one of just a handful of Asians. And she loved it.

Chan graduated in the early 1970s, on the heels of the Civil Rights movement. It was a time when many minority communities were agitating for equal access to schools, housing, health care and jobs. A large influx of Asians were arriving in Oakland, prompting a group of community leaders, health professionals and students to survey the 40-block area surrounding Chinatown. They discovered that those residents were getting health care services at half the rate of the mainstream population, probably because there was only one doctor in Chinatown.

The Chinatown community was predominantly uninsured and extremely low-income. They faced language, transportation, economic and cultural barriers

to quality medical care. For example, immigrants from rural China even today can be uncomfortable with answering questions about sexual health or dressing completely for pelvic exams.

And so, as the pressing need for health services for the Chinatown population was established, AHS was born. Very soon thereafter, Chan joined the staff part-time, volunteering more than double her paid time. "That was tenor of the time," Chan laughed.

Today, Chan is beyond pleased that AHS has expanded so greatly — it now offers acupuncture, minor surgery and some specialty services including cardiology, neurology and dermatology. There are interpreters for nine languages including Mongolian, Khmer (Cambodian) and Mien. As of 2005, the organization employed 161 staff including 41 doctors, nurses and physician assistants and had an operating budget of \$16 million.

And the AHS does more than just provide medical care — they organize the community, doing everything from encouraging patients to vote to bringing patients to Sacramento to speak out against proposed Medi-Cal cuts.

They also teach patients to advocate for themselves. "We explain their condition, why we're thinking about this treatment option, and they ask questions so they're empowered," Chan said. "It's not like that for a lot of patients who come from other countries or down the street from another

doctor and have no idea of their diagnosis or why they're taking medicine."

Not only has Chan contributed to AHS, but she's also learned a lot from her experiences, especially as an activist. As an immigrant whose native tongue was not English, she was often reluctant to speak out for the community. "I've been growing up with the organization," Chan explained.

"I'm 68 years old and still happy to be here," she said. "I look forward to coming back to see patients. People who come to work for the organization are just exceptional. I'm in awe of them, their commitment to community and wanting to make difference."

In many ways her story is similar to those immigrants she serves, who may have been doctors or professionals in their own country but end up working in a supermarket or restaurant in America.

It was those meager beginnings that inspired Chan not only to become one of the first doctors at AHS, but also to dedicate herself to helping immigrants make a successful transition to a long, healthy life in their new home — even if it requires the occasional babysitting of newborns.

Alice Chen is a freelance writer in the Bay Area.

Asian Health Services

Main clinic: 818 Webster St., Oakland
Phone: (510) 986-6800
Web: www.asianhealthservices.org
Facility: 36 exam rooms and a dental clinic with seven chairs
Patients: 20,000 patients and more than 90,000 patient visits annually
Languages: English and nine Asian languages including Cantonese, Vietnamese, Mandarin, Korean, Khmer (Cambodian), Mien, Mongolian, Tagalog and Lao