

## Local Health

By Terry Burns

### ***“Room at the Pond”***

During the holiday honoring Martin Luther King earlier this month, I did some thinking about the changes and maturing process our nation and I personally have experienced over the years with respect to racial equality. My thoughts were drawn to an experience several years ago and I was reminded of an old proverb most of us have heard that says, “Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.”

Keeping that in mind during this short article, it dawned on me that one key success factor for our future is to be relevant to all of our community. I believe this applies to me personally, as well as in my professional work. A key opportunity exists to engage a larger portion of our community for the future. I want to encourage all of us to figure out how to anticipate, understand and participate in societal change as it pertains to racial equality.

I believe cultural and racial equality are areas where our nation can improve—both nationally and at a community level. I’m not interested in policy changes or redefining relationships with predominant minority groups. Rather, I’d like to work with others locally to look at where we are right now and work to make each next decision better: personally, professionally, organizationally and as a community.

We need to try to understand cultural and racial changes in our population, and try to predict future trends, so we can effectively serve our community 10, 20 and 30 years from now. To fulfill our business purposes and missions – certainly to

be financially viable and prosper – local employers, schools, government agencies have to be connected to those we serve;, and the best way do so would be to dig deeper, doing what it takes to truly reflect our community within our organizations.

Using the hospital as an example, if we don't deliberately work to assure that our team truly represents the community, we could become disconnected, unrepresentative of our community and unable to effectively serve and relate to those we serve. This would prevent us from fulfilling our mission here in Mendocino County.

Since 1980, while our community has experienced relatively steady growth, our Latino population has increased from 5.5%<sup>1</sup> to 19%<sup>2</sup> of the population. How is this being reflected in our community leadership, employment, government? I'm thinking of opportunities that we're able to take advantage of because our entire community is engaged.

I'm asking our team at Ukiah Valley Medical Center to consider ways to assure that our future workforce, including our supervisors and managers and all areas of the hospital, better reflects our community. We cannot push off or delay this complex process. I invite you to pause and think for a minute of things you can do at your business or organization to affect change, become more inclusive and truly reflective of our community. As residents, business leaders and employees, we need to rethink our recruitment and hiring practices to assure that we're looking at our entire community and bringing the whole community's depth into our organization.

An obvious but challenging example of this inclusive mindset would be to rally our entire community to work with our schools to keep all of our kids in the system through graduation. We have a responsibility to look for and remove barriers that prevent our youth from successfully navigating the educational system. Any group that is disproportionately missing from high school graduation will be subsequently under-represented in advanced education programs and

future management and leadership roles. Our organization has identified a need to make sure that the pool of applicants into health care schools, including Mendocino College's and the Mendocino County Office of Education's health care programs, include a good mix of students, reflecting the cross section of our community. This isn't about quotas and numbers – it's about our future. We've already identified some barriers and are committed to working with others to learn of more, and remove them.

While I've been aware of our community's linkage to the Native American heritage, I was unaware of how my own organization addressed the needs of our Native American patients. When we conducted our Community Input Survey in early 2009, I was surprised and saddened to hear stories of individuals who felt insensitivity to their cultural needs. As I've looked, it appears that our ability to perceive cultural, racial or ethnic needs is not nearly as robust as our ability to detect and treat underlying medical conditions. I hadn't even seen very many Native Americans in the hospital, how could we possibly be failing to meet their needs? The invaluable candid comments from Native Americans during our community survey encouraged a reflective process that has caused me to consider, but not yet fully answer the following questions: Am I, or are we...

- Welcoming to people who look different from the racial majority?
- Operating from a non—stereotyping mindset when we meet to assess a patient's condition or a family history of illness?
- Accommodating to people who speak different languages?
- Caring in a context that reflects consideration of someone's culture, race or ethnicity? For instance, adequately appreciating how the role of family in illness and grief varies by culture.
- Celebrating the differences that we all have, which truly make us all stronger?

What are we to do? I work with a team of the most caring, compassionate individuals I've ever been honored to serve with. Together we do something truly sacred. No one I work with would say, "Let's serve this group less than that group." Yet, we have an opportunity to better appreciate our diversity and thus, better serve our patients and their families. We have an opportunity to lead a broader group which includes our team here at Ukiah Valley Medical Center to a deeper perspective of sensitivity and inclusiveness.

The sensitivity I'm describing is neither silence, wimpyness, nor living in guilt. Rather, it is the opposite of apathy. It's a conscious effort to learn about the diversity within our community and appreciate it, treasure it, and seek to reflect it in our organizations.

Some will respond to this article with skepticism, sharing that "we're the land of equal opportunity" and "I've pulled myself up by my bootstraps." I've said those same things in the past and they have an element of truth in them. During the past few years, however, I've learned that we all have another equal opportunity – the opportunity to leave a legacy for our children and grandchildren, where there is less cultural, racial and ethnic distrust and a better quality of life for all. This isn't a communal utopia – rather it is openness to new ideas, and purposeful change where each of us has influence and reward beyond description. This isn't a hand out, or even a hand up.

It is our privilege to feed people who are starving, today! It is our privilege to teach people skills to enable them to take care of themselves, and it is our privilege to provide room in society for individuals to step into opportunities where they can experience success. As I opened this article, we've all heard the counsel that giving a person a fish will let them eat for a day. Teaching them to fish will let them eat for a lifetime. Today, I want to encourage all of us to make sure that we also give the entire community room at the pond!

<sup>1</sup>Demographics of California Counties: A Comparison of 1980, 1990, and 2000 Census Data, Published by the Center for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity, Stanford University

<sup>2</sup>from California Department of Finance, Schedule E-3, Race / Ethnic Population Estimates Data Files at:  
<http://www.dof.ca.gov/research/demographic/data/e-3/documents/UpdatedMendocino.xls>