NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Dominican nun, doctor strives to heal the whole person

Theresa Laurence Catholic News Service | Oct. 28, 2011

Dominican Sr. Mary Diana Dreger talks with patient Augustina McKlean during a follow-up visit at St. Thomas Family Health Center South in Nashville, Tenn., in early October. As both a sister and medical doctor, she continues the legacy of Catholic health care that has been firmly rooted in Middle Tennessee since the Daughters of Charity founded St. Thomas Hospital in 1898. (CNS photo/Theresa Laurence, Tennessee Register)

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- She enters the exam room clad in the standard physician's uniform: white lab coat, stethoscope, medical chart. But she is also wears the standard Dominican sisters' uniform: white habit, black veil, a long strand of rosary beads hanging from her belt.

As both a sister and a medical doctor, Dominican Sister Mary Diana Dreger embodies the unique intersection of spirituality and science in her medical practice.

"The idea of serving others is what we do as sisters anyway, so there's a nice flow there being in the medical field," she said.

A primary care provider at St. Thomas Family Health Center South in Nashville, Sister Mary Diana continues the legacy of Catholic health care that has been firmly rooted in Middle Tennessee since the Daughters of Charity founded St. Thomas Hospital in 1898.

Sister Mary Diana completed her medical degree at Vanderbilt University in 2001, the first nun ever to do so, and wrapped up her residency in 2004. She has been working at the St. Thomas clinic since 2007. She also runs a Saturday clinic at the Dominican motherhouse, and serves as the primary-care physician for about 75 Dominican Sisters of St. Cecilia.

Sister Mary Diana lectures often in Nashville and around the country, and serves as the secretary/treasurer of the Nashville Guild of the Catholic Medical Association. She is also an assistant clinical professor of medicine at Vanderbilt and regularly hosts medical students for their rotations at the St. Thomas clinic.

Providing health care in a habit signals to patients that caring for the sick is a core value of the Catholic faith, and Sister Mary Diana is proud to be publicly carrying on the Catholic health care tradition.

The population she serves at the St. Thomas clinic is predominately Spanish-speaking. At first, Sister Mary

Diana used a translator during patient consultations, but then decided she had to learn the language. "If you can't communicate with people, that's not a good way to do medicine," she said. Now, she speaks fluently and easily with her patients in Spanish.

"She's lovely, very nice," said Juan Olivieri, a patient of Sister Mary Diana's for the past three years. "I wish all doctors would be like her."

It's important to Sister Mary Diana to put her patients at ease. Even though she is the only sister in Nashville who is also a medical doctor, "I've been pleasantly surprised with how welcome I've been wearing a habit," she said.

In her experience, wearing a habit inspires more trust than skepticism among patients. "Patients are comfortable talking about just about anything with me," she said.

Sister Mary Diana even had a male patient inquire about a vasectomy procedure. According to his chart, he was Catholic, "we were in a Catholic facility, and I am obviously Catholic," she said. "It shows there's a lot of people who don't understand church teaching about a lot of things."

If issues such as birth control come up, Sister Mary Diana does her best to explain things to her patients from a scientific point of view, sparing them a moral lecture.

"I told him that it's my job to keep your body healthy, and if I destroy part of your body because it's working properly, that's not about me taking care of your health." She gave him a short lesson on natural family planning, to which he was receptive.

While he was embarrassed about the situation, Sister Mary Diana said, he continued seeing her for routine visits.

At the St. Thomas Family Health Center South, most patients pay $20 for an office visit.

Even for the cash-strapped population the clinic mostly serves, this is not too much of a burden, Sister Mary Diana said. The problem is when a clinic doctor needs to refer the patient on to another specialist. Then the patient "really has to think about health care as a commodity," Sister Mary Diana said. For example, "if they need an orthopedic surgeon, I have nowhere to send them," unless she can find a doctor who will agree to provide services for free.

Like many health care providers, Sister Mary Diana is concerned about drastically weakened conscience protections being written into federal law. With this could come more obstetrics, gynecology and nursing programs effectively hanging out the "no Catholics need apply" shingle, by requiring all residents to learn abortion procedures.

"It's a little scary that the areas of medicine concerned with bringing life into the world would say that you must be willing to destroy that life," Sister Mary Diana said.

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