



Champion of Change

Anne Peters, MD, Professor of Medicine and Director of the University of Southern California Diabetes Program

Nationally renowned Dr. Anne Peters is one of the top 20 physicians treating diabetes in the country. Dr. Peters is currently developing the nation's largest outreach program for community-based diabetes prevention and treatment. She is the author of the best-selling book, *Conquering Diabetes* (Hudson Street Press).

Dr. Peters believes that diabetes is quickly becoming the most serious epidemic the U.S. has ever faced. People born in the year 2000 or after will have a one-in-three chance of developing the disease in their lifetime, compared to a one-in-twelve chance 40 years ago. African-Americans and Latinos are the hardest hit: half of all African- Americans and Latinos born today will become diabetic.

"Diabetes is having a devastating impact on our country. Not only is it becoming more common, it's becoming more common at a younger and younger age," says Dr. Peters.

But despite these daunting numbers, Dr. Peters believes people can take control of their disease. She is proving it in her Beverly Hills clinic and her second clinic located in East Los Angeles, one of the city's poorest neighborhoods. Here, she is dedicated to treating Hispanic patients like Sandra Najar, a diabetic and mother of a four-year-old girl with disabilities. Dr. Peters is helping Sandra control her diabetes – exactly the same way she helps her very affluent Beverly Hills patients.

"Treatment for people with diabetes is getting worse not because we don't know what we should do, but because most physicians don't have the time. Ninety-five percent of patients with diabetes are only treated by primary care providers. So we need to help primary care providers do a better job," according to Dr. Peters.

Dr. Peters contends that the best way to help all of her patients was to show them how to control and better manage their own disease.

"When I first see a patient, they come back every other week. They meet with my educators and my nutritionist. They have a team that they know is on their side. And so people don't have to take the whole responsibility. It's a shared responsibility. And it works."

In her East L.A. clinic, Dr. Peters created a system to help her diabetes patients that is both effective and cost-effective. She hired Spanish-speaking nurses, developed written protocols and essentially empowered them to be diabetologists.

Another method Dr. Peters is using to help her patients take charge is through engagement of peer educators, or promotorras, as these individuals are called in the Hispanic community. Promotorras are trained to work in neighborhoods and to form support groups.

“We need these groups to be led by people who have the disease and who can share experiences and approaches to deal with it. A lot of the diabetes work has to be within the communities, not in health care centers.”

Dr. Peters is now partnering with Dr. Jeffrey Guterman, senior medical director of the Los Angeles County Department of Health Services, to implement these same chronic disease management methods throughout the county’s primary care clinics. Only federal bailouts have kept the health system from imploding due to the dramatic increase of uninsured patients with chronic diseases, particularly diabetes. Dr. Guterman is counting on a complete structural overhaul – putting his job on the line by adopting Dr. Peters’ methods. By showing patients how to control their diabetes, Dr. Peters and Dr. Guterman are attempting to cut hospitalizations; reduce complications such as blindness, amputations and death; and in the process, save the county health department from complete collapse.

“The county is really trying to make a difference by identifying at-risk patients and providing them care. What we’re trying to do is unify the care for patients in the safety net with diabetes by creating an infrastructure that will ensure everybody with diabetes will have the same sort of care,” says Dr. Peters.

The stakes couldn’t be higher. “Los Angeles County has to do this right because if it doesn’t, the risk is huge. We’ll have as many as 500,000 people with diabetes who aren’t being well treated and the burden on the struggling county health care system will be tremendous. We know that we can help people with diabetes in our clinics. By using similar systems we believe we can be successful countywide.”