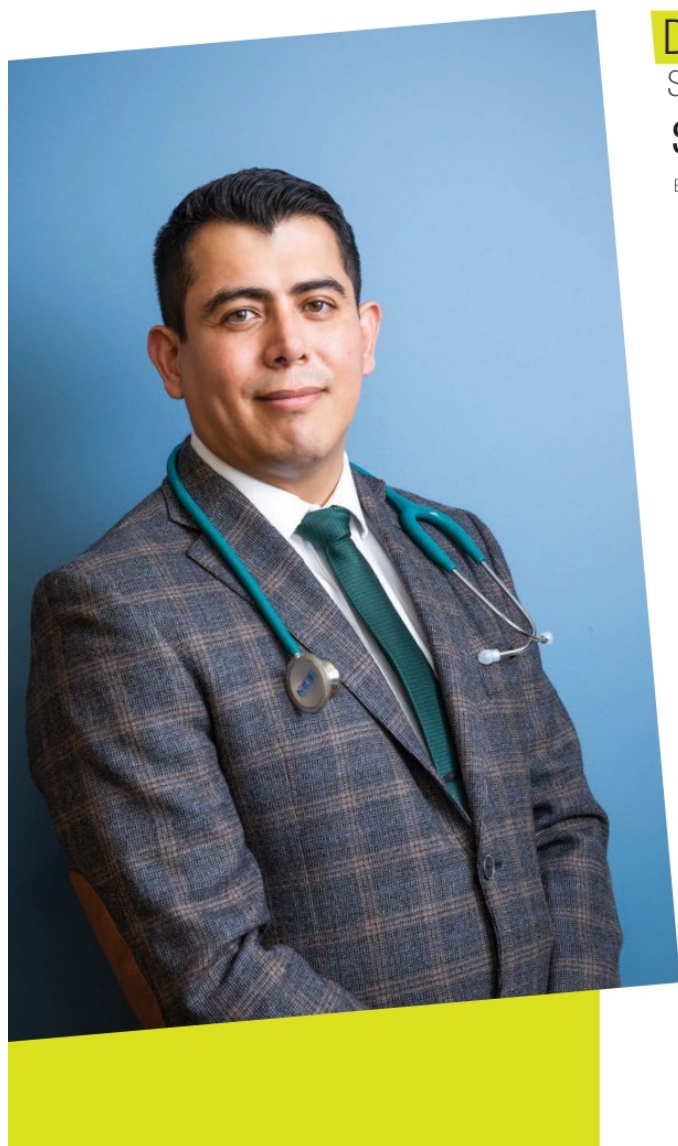


Life Changers

For The Lifesavers

A trio of local doctors share the patient, the procedure and the personal crossroads that changed the way they practice medicine.



Dr. Jorge Ramallo

Sixteenth Street Community Health Center

Seeing the whole of the patient.

BY LAUREN SIEBEN | PHOTOS BY LAURA DIERBECK

Not long after Dr. Jorge Ramallo came to Milwaukee in 2018 to practice internal medicine and pediatrics at Sixteenth Street Community Health Center, he began seeing a patient with a book-length medical history.

The patient had dealt with chronic pain and depression for years. Her fibromyalgia — a chronic pain disorder — was the kind of condition that raises a red flag for many providers, Ramallo says.

“That carries a lot of stigma, with the opioid epidemic,” he says. “Treating the chronic pain and weaning patients off opioids can be a very oppositional relationship [between patients and providers], unfortunately.”

By the time she began seeing Ramallo, the patient was frustrated. She had already seen four or five other providers. On top of her ongoing physical pain, she was also a survivor of intimate partner violence. At home, she was raising two kids — each with behavioral and medical problems — by herself. She frequently visited the ER for care and struggled to navigate a confusing health care system.

“She’s kind of the perfect storm of having everything going wrong in your life and manifesting the stress as pain,” Ramallo says.

Ramallo and his patient got off to a rocky start.

“I always had a negative gut feeling when I saw her name on my schedule, because I knew what the visit was going to be like,” Ramallo says frankly. “I knew she was still going to be in pain, and I’d laid out clear boundaries about no opioids.”

But the patient kept returning to see Ramallo, and slowly the tone of her appointments began to change.

One day, Ramallo says, “We were having a discussion, and she could tell how frustrated I was. ... I was being a little more expressive about how nothing we were doing was helping. She stopped me and said, ‘You know, doctor, I’m just grateful you’re taking on my case. I know I’m difficult, but I want you to not give up on me.’”

That moment made Ramallo realize that “slowly, she has been getting better, and it was my job to show her the progress that she’s made,” he says.

Ramallo also understood that treating his patient’s intersecting conditions required extra attention and time.

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He combed through hundreds of pages of her medical history, piecing together a puzzle that showed a more complete picture than what he could see in the exam room.

“I was able to find she had problems that aggravated after separating from her first husband, and her chronic pain started after that,” he says. “There was an increase in the number of visits to the clinic and ER after problems with her kids.”

Taking the time to understand his patient’s history has helped Ramallo treat the root of her pain — not just the symptoms. His patient has been gradually improving, and the way Ramallo sees it, they’re on this journey together. He’s even taken on an advocacy role by working to find an orthopedic surgeon who can perform a pro bono herniated disc surgery, since his patient is uninsured.

Ramallo was also able to forge a close relationship with the patient by speaking her language: At the Sixteenth Street clinics, 86 percent of patients are Hispanic, and 72 percent of patients prefer to be served in a language other than English, according to the organization’s annual report. Ramallo’s patient was grateful to speak directly with him in Spanish, instead of communicating through an interpreter.

“We have amazing providers that speak English ... but [language] is always a barrier, unfortunately,” Ramallo says. “Especially for patients like this who need to be able to look eye-to-eye with the doctor and feel heard.”

Many of Ramallo’s patients at the clinic have similar stories: They come in with chronic conditions, and their symptoms are often compounded by struggles with depression or stressful home lives. Taking the time to understand each patient’s full story has been critical in providing care that makes a difference in patients’ lives.

“When I’m having a negative gut reaction or seeing that the patient is becoming upset, I try to step back and ask them what else is going on,” he continues. “That has helped me unmask severe depression, suicidal ideation or loneliness — a big issue for a lot of people away from their home countries and families.”

Ultimately, working with a challenging patient in his early days at the clinic has given Ramallo a healthy perspective on his work.

“It humbles you, just stepping back and realizing your own biases that everybody has and checking yourself,” he says.

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