



# Anthony Martinez

## FINDING NEW TREATMENT MODELS FOR LIVER DISEASE AND ADDICTION DISORDERS

BY MARIA SCRIVANI

Taking medical care to the streets sounds like a pitch for a TV series, but it's a real-world model that's working right now in Buffalo. It is also the particular mission of Dr. Anthony Martinez, medical director of hepatology at Erie County Medical Center since 2013.

The niche carved out by this Rhode Island native is unique, informed by a passion to treat the underserved, with a focus on hepatitis C treatment. After graduating from medical school in Guadalajara, Mexico, Martinez completed his training in New York City via the Fifth Pathway Program. He is the first Guadalajara alumnus to secure a fellowship at Cornell, in addiction medicine and hepatitis C evaluation and management. During his fellowship, he discovered where he was most needed.

A huge prescription opiate problem had turned into heroin addiction for people who found that drug cheaper, purer, and more widely available. Sharing needles used for injection led to wider spread of hepatitis C. The old protocol required patients to abstain from alcohol and drugs before they could start treatment, Martinez explains. "At Cornell, we started treating them without that protocol. They needed treatment the most, and treatment is prevention."

It becomes a gateway to the whole health care system, he explains. "Before, you couldn't come [for hep C



treatment] if you weren't 'clean,'" he says. "Now we have patients who start thinking about addiction treatment and access to other aspects of health care." Suddenly, people who weren't getting the help they needed most critically, not to mention access to an array of services that translate to healthier lifestyles, were able to enter the system. Martinez attributes his success—nine Buffalo clinics in UB-affiliated hospitals,

where numbers have soared from four to 100 patients seen weekly and no-shows have been reduced from fifty to ten percent—to a new paradigm that he calls guerrilla medicine.

"It's all about relationship building," Martinez says. "My whole philosophy is to integrate into the community. Eighty-five percent of what I do is in the clinics. The patients like us. They trust us. They know me as Tony. I don't wear

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a white coat. They have my cell phone number, and they can call me anytime, like the woman who called me at three a.m. from jail, because she needed her hep C med. I was her one call. What we do is very real. There is no pretense and no stigma. Everyone on our team is of the same mindset, so our patients never feel any marginalization. They get enough of that out in the street.”

Martinez and others on the team took medical care to the streets, early on seeking out patients where they lived. To this day, the doctor will speak on liver disease and addiction treatment anywhere, from a church basement on the East Side to a recent conference on HCV [hepatitis C virus] State of the Art at the University at Buffalo, where he is associate clinical professor in the Jacobs School of Medicine. Martinez constantly reviews studies, research, and clinical trials of new treatment options, always asking, “What does this get my patients?”

For a kid raised by a single mom (his Mexican father was killed in a car accident shortly after his birth) who worked three jobs in her native Providence, the world inhabited by Anthony Martinez is a marvelous place. Though he has a dual heritage, he did not speak Spanish when he first went off to medical school following graduation from Providence College. It was total immersion, both cultural and academic. “I wasn’t a classroom superstar, but I was always highly motivated,” Martinez says. “I remember a professor telling me I had heart to carry me through. He said you have to find a way, or make one. And I never forget my grandfather’s advice—Be humble. Be kind. Be of use.”

Before coming to Buffalo, Martinez worked in San Diego, where he found himself missing the change of seasons. He now says Buffalo reminds him of Providence, with its blue-collar vibe and no pretense. “This is a city that suits me. I came here to build a program. The medical school was coming downtown, and I wanted to contribute to the revitalization of a great American city. UB has been hugely supportive. I want to continue to expand and promote the concept of academic medicine here, and help the expanding refugee population. I just want to see us ingrained in the community. We have a good gig and there’s a lot more we can do.”