

# Meeting Special Needs

**H**urricane season requires extra planning for families of children with special health needs. Many types of medical equipment, medical supplies and prescription medicines may be unavailable after a storm, and if road conditions are poor, in-home health care services or outpatient clinic visits could be inaccessible for days or even weeks.

**“If a child is seeing a number of doctors, one of them needs to be tasked with overseeing the child’s medical care as a whole.”**

—DR. KATHRYN OSTERMAIER, *director, Texas Children’s Hospital Special Needs Primary Clinic and assistant professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine*

*Members of The Auxiliary partnered with the Texas Children’s Hospital Special Needs Primary Clinic for an emergency-preparedness phone-a-thon.*



In May, as hurricane season approached, members of The Auxiliary partnered with the Texas Children’s Hospital Special Needs Primary Clinic to hold a phone-a-thon to contact the more than 300 families who rely on the clinic for care, providing them with information about what to do in the event of an emergency and helping them formulate a plan that takes their child’s medical conditions into account.

Such an effort fits with the clinic’s mission to offer “wrap around” service to medically complex patients, said Dr. Kathryn Ostermaier, director of the clinic and an assistant professor of pediatrics at Baylor College of Medicine.

Established in November 2007, the Special Needs Primary Clinic provides care for patients who are typically dealing with multiple, serious health issues and may even be technology dependent. These patients may be seeing three to five subspecialists on a

regular basis and often do not have one designated physician to oversee all their care and manage their multiple conditions simultaneously. That’s what the clinic was designed to provide.

“It’s a common concept in medicine that you need a primary care physician looking over you so your care doesn’t get fragmented,” Ostermaier said. “When care gets fragmented, things get missed. That can be an especially big problem with the kinds of patients we treat, and that’s what we prevent.”

In many ways, the care provided by the clinic is similar to that of a standard pediatrician’s office. Patients see their primary care physician for regular check-ups, but they also have access to other clinic specialists when unexpected medical issues arise. Doctors in the Special Needs Primary Clinic distinguish themselves by assuming more difficult responsibilities than a physician in a normal pediatric practice might feel comfortable handling.

And, because of the complexity of care required, the patients are allotted more time for their appointments than they would receive at a typical pediatrician’s office. It’s not uncommon for doctors at the clinic to address a dozen separate, significant issues during this time, hopefully reducing the number of subspecialist visits a patient would otherwise require.

Just as important as the medical care, Ostermaier emphasizes, is the assistance the clinic provides through its social worker, Valerie Perales; registered nurse, Roshunda Parker; and clinic coordinator, Linda Swayzer. Many patients require specialized equipment or services such as wheelchairs, respirators or



*Dr. Kathryn Ostermaier examines patient Sylvia “Joey” Knott in the Texas Children’s Special Needs Clinic.*

physical therapy, and the clinic staff is there to help the families locate and attain the resources they need.

“Our philosophy is to care for the whole child—and their families—in order to support them and keep them as healthy as possible in their home setting,” Ostermaier said.

Indeed, health in the home setting is the ultimate goal of the Special Needs Primary Clinic. It’s what drives the clinic’s physicians and staff to care for patients who by definition

are difficult to care for, and what inspires efforts such as the hurricane preparedness phone-a-thon. Thanks to the help of the Special Needs Primary Clinic these patients and their families are better prepared to maintain their health, no matter what conditions they face. ☺

—by TOBY WEBER