

## Student Goes From Examining Patients in Singapore To Examining Health Care Delivery in L.A. County

**YEE-WEI LIM** PRACTICED AS A FAMILY PHYSICIAN in his native Singapore for five years, but as he moved into new settings – finally ending up at the Ministry of Health, where he worked on health-policy and health-promotion project development issues – he grew more interested in the big picture of health care.

“I had contact with people who did health services research, and it led me to think more broadly about health care than just seeing patients on a one-to-one basis,” Lim says.

The new thinking led him to come to the United States in 1997, where he enrolled in the UCLA School of Public Health and is on track to receive his Ph.D. from the Department of Health Services at the end of this year.

As a physician practicing in a variety of settings in Singapore, Lim had become intrigued by certain patterns. Working in a neonatal intensive care unit, he observed that patients with lower socioeconomic backgrounds seemed to have poorer birth outcomes. As an emergency room physician, he noted that certain types of patients were more likely to use the ER inappropriately. He saw inconsistencies in how physicians delivered care for the same conditions.

Once he got to UCLA, Lim became interested in a new set of issues related to the problem of access to care for vulnerable populations in the United States. (Access to care is less of an issue in Singapore, which has a universal health care system.) His dissertation examines the access to primary and secondary care for Los Angeles County’s indigent population, and how the L.A. County Department of Health Services’ restructuring of its public health care system in the mid-1990s has affected its delivery of care to this population.

The restructuring effort, which began in 1995, was focused in part on attempting to expand primary care for indigent patients and reduce their reliance on hospital and emergency room services. The Public-Private Partnership (PPP) program, in which the county contracted with private safety-net clinics to provide care for the uninsured, was introduced. Lim found in his research that the advent of the PPP program resulted in an increase in the number of uninsured patients going to the primary care clinics, as well as total patient visits. “This is a significant positive finding, because if indigent patients have access to primary care, they’re less likely to go to the emergency room for non-urgent conditions,” says Lim. “That reduces the overcrowding problem at county hospitals, reduces the costs to the county, and gives better access to the uninsured patient.” County health department decision-makers have been interested in the results, Lim says.

Upon completing his doctoral studies, Lim hopes to continue doing research in primary care delivery and its relation to hospital utilization and outcomes, as well as investigating the financing and organization of safety-net providers in the community and examining how the safety-net network could be developed and sustained under a variety of financial arrangements. “I have learned a lot from the doctoral program,” Lim says. “The faculty have been great mentors, and the hands-on research projects while I was doing my coursework really helped to solidify what I learned in class. I have thoroughly enjoyed the experience.”

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