

DISPATCH FROM THE MEDICAL FRONT

In the street

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A seemingly endless line of people in ripped and dirty clothing advance to the window of the *roulotte*, eagerly awaiting their hotdogs, hot chocolate, coffee and juice.

In many cases, the lineup at the caravan will yield their only sustenance for the day: “*Toute garnie*” (all dressed), “*Michigan*” (meat sauce) and “*Mayo et moutarde*” (mayonnaise and mustard) are the choices available for these homeless youth on the streets of Montreal, Quebec, where a friend and fellow resident, my husband and I have volunteered on this rainy and cold April night.

We have come here to ride the fabled van of *Dans la rue*, a grassroots community-based organization that provides hot food and drink, dry goods, clothing and personal goods to street kids.

Unlike the volunteers who commit a minimum of one year to the cause, we have only one weekend off from call, and appreciate the opportunity to participate in two drives with the team.

Operating five nights a week, the van drives around downtown Montréal, on streets thick with homeless people, making four stops to welcome youth with unconditional acceptance.

A relationship develops between the volunteers aboard the van and the youth who frequent it. The youths are encouraged to visit the Chez Pops Day Centre, where a variety of services are provided, such as a cafeteria serving healthy meals three times a day, a depot filled with donated clothes, a medical clinic and access to ongoing psychological care.

Volunteer nurses and physicians provide medical and psychological care for the youth, who often lack Quebec or provincial health care cards or other pieces of identification. It is the only



Dr. Dina Kulik

Hot dogs for homeless individuals come with dressing options when delivered by grassroots organization *Dans la rue*: “*Toute garnie* (all dressed),” “*Michigan* (meat sauce),” and “*Mayo et moutarde*.”

link to the health care system for many of these street youth and free, confidential medical and psychological care is provided without prejudice.

The *Dans la rue* school enables youth to earn high school credits at their own pace and helps them to develop self esteem. The holistic and comprehensive model of care is one that both the youth and volunteers value.

While aboard the van, we heard stories of youth being abused and victimized, both at home and on the street. We were shown pictures of children as young as 11 years of age who had run away from home, as well as pictures of infants and children of homeless youth, who were also living on the street. These second-generation homeless children do not know what it is like to grow up with permanent housing, adequate

nutrition, or clothing sufficient for the cold Montréal winters.

On the ride, it occurs to me that it would be nice to believe that *Dans la rue* provides them not only comfort, but a measure of hope that they can find a way to another life. — Dina Kulik MD, Toronto, Ont.

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CMAJ invites contributions to “Dispatch from the medical front,” in which physicians and other health care providers offer eyewitness glimpses of medical frontiers, whether defined by location or intervention. Submissions, which must run a maximum 700 words, should be forwarded to: wayne.kondro@cmaj.ca