

# Street Medicine

## This caring doctor makes house calls where there are no walls

By Cynthia Dermody  
From [Reader's Digest](#)

The sun is setting on downtown Phoenix after a 70-degree blue-sky January day. There's a slight chill in the air now, and a haze settles over Camelback Mountain, towering over the city. Some 2,000 feet below, a cloud of cigarette smoke surrounds hundreds of people milling about under the covered compound of the Andre House soup kitchen. They're waiting for the doors to open for the evening meal.

Dr. Adele O'Sullivan, a petite brunette, pulls into the lot in her green station wagon. She wrangles two plastic chests of drawers from the back, stacks them on top of each other on a trolley, and begins to push them up the entrance ramp.



"I need to get some antibiotic ointment," yells a bald woman wearing a do-rag and missing several teeth. The doctor maneuvers her trolley through the heavy metal doors and into a small foyer in back of the kitchen's offices, with a poster reading "If you want peace, work for justice" (Pope Paul VI) on the wall. Near the chests -- packed with bandages, antibiotics, cough drops, inhalers, ointments, new socks -- she puts two plastic folding chairs facing each other.

Cruz Portillo, a 42-year-old man with a scruffy goatee and wearing a black baseball cap, comes in. His ear is throbbing, and he's heard that a doctor visits the soup kitchen every

Wednesday night to help people like him -- those who are sick but often have no home, money or insurance.

"Hello," O'Sullivan says in a friendly tone as she turns to greet him. "So when did your ear start to hurt?" She wastes no time pulling out her otoscope and looking into his ears. A long line of needy people are waiting to see her before the kitchen's doors shut two hours from now.

"Today -- this morning, I think," replies Portillo, white paint splattered on his hands and black cotton pants.

Next she begins to lift his shirt to check his breathing, but Portillo flinches. "I haven't even taken a shower for two days," he says. He sleeps on the floor of a condemned house.

"That's okay -- big breath now, in and out through your mouth."

O'Sullivan lays one hand on the man's back, and the other guides her stethoscope. Portillo relaxes. As her scope drops back to her chest, it dangles against a sparkling gold cross necklace -- the only physical sign that the 55-year-old doctor is also a nun.

"Your lungs are fine," she says as she reaches into a drawer and pulls out a bottle of antibiotics for his ear.

"I'm glad I came to see you," Portillo says as he heads down the hall to get his meal. "I'll stop in next Wednesday and let you know how I am."

A connection. A victory. As medical director for Maricopa County's Health Care for the Homeless (HCH) Program, one of O'Sullivan's challenges is building relationships with people who desperately need treatment within a system that has traditionally never put out the welcome mat. Her hope is that Portillo will start visiting her regularly at her clinic for routine care.

Maricopa County is the fourth most populous county in the nation. It has about 13,000 homeless residents. O'Sullivan treats some 3,000 every year at the clinic, a new facility with eight exam rooms, a shower and state-of-the-art equipment. Though all services and medicines are free, many people with serious infections, diabetes, heart conditions and drug problems don't know it's there, or simply consider their health a low priority.

So O'Sullivan and her portable drugstore also go to *them* -- to the soup kitchens, the resource centers, the streets.

Few patients know that O'Sullivan is a nun; habits were no longer handed out when she joined the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet in 1968. She doesn't use words to evangelize or preach. Rather, her deep Christian faith guides her every time she leans in close to her patients and looks them in the eyes, in the way her face wrinkles with compassion when they tell her their stories, in her willingness to lay her hands on those whom others might turn away.

O'Sullivan's commitment to treating the homeless is one of the reasons she was named the 2006 Family Physician of the Year by the American Academy of Family Physicians.

"She is completely present when she's speaking with you -- she gives herself to you at that moment," says Greg Raglow, medical director of Banner Good Samaritan Family Practice Center in Phoenix, who first met O'Sullivan in medical school at the University of Arizona in Tucson. "You come away from her feeling good about yourself, that you are cared for."

Adele O'Sullivan knows how a bout of bad luck or a wrong turn often runs the tenuous line between someone being a vital member of society and being homeless. And she's also well aware of how lonely living on the streets can be.

Steve McGlothlin, a handsome, gentle man in his 50s, has come to the clinic with pneumonia and shoulder pain. O'Sullivan gives him an exam and listens to his lungs. She then places her hands on the man's shoulders for a quick massage to check the soreness.

"Oh, that's good," McGlothlin says, dropping his chin to his chest and rolling his shoulders, as if he hasn't felt such relief in years.

McGlothlin's story is not uncommon: A successful business owner, whose wife died, he discovered cocaine, lost everything, then faced drug charges and prison. He landed in Phoenix hoping to find work, and after two and a half years of struggle, he's recently worked his way up into a halfway house and a job at a commercial refrigeration company.

"Things are progressively good," he says. "I'm starting to think about dating again."

The doctor traces her desire to tend and nurture back to her childhood when she cared for her family's vegetable garden in Los Angeles. Today she keeps a robust garden with cauliflower, broccoli and radishes in the backyard of an immaculate beige-colored one-story home she shares with two other sisters and her 15-year-old lab mix, Taffy.

But it was her father, a fun-loving Irishman, who gave O'Sullivan her first lesson in human respect. "Homeless people would knock on our door begging for food, and he never turned anyone away," the former high school candy striper says. "I can picture him going into our cupboards, taking food off the shelves and bagging it. I wanted to be like that. Quiet and good."

O'Sullivan entered the convent after high school, and seeing her knack for medicine, the sisters put her through pharmacy school. Back then, nuns didn't become doctors, but she had a yearning and asked anyway. It took two years for the sisters to decide, but they agreed. She graduated in 1984 and completed an internship and residency in family and community medicine. After working with state mental patients and migrant workers for several years, she joined HCH in 1996.

Though she spends most of her time at the clinic, several days a week O'Sullivan loads up her "traveling drug show" to treat patients like 19-year-old Ashley Ihms, who popped into the foyer of Andre House after her meal.

The young woman with a shiny strawberry blonde bob and upturned nose tells O'Sullivan she's been having trouble breathing. She's three months pregnant and plans to marry her 25-year-old boyfriend in three days.

"Okay, let's give you an inhaler, and when you feel like you're having trouble, use it. Do you want to try it out now?" O'Sullivan asks.

"No," says Ihms timidly, her hands in the lap of her dirt-smearred white stretch pants.

"I think you ought to try it now, just so I can see if you've got the idea," O'Sullivan says.

Ihms agrees and the doctor demonstrates before handing her the inhaler for a try. She misses the first couple of times, but flashes a proud smile when she finally gets it.

By the end of the night O'Sullivan has injected nearly a dozen flu vaccines and dispensed packets of cold medicine and bottles of antibiotics. And, hopefully, she's made a few new connections. The evening ends on a good note: Her last patient announces he's found an apartment.

She relishes moments like this one. In some small or large way, perhaps she had something to do with it. Then there are the not-so-happy endings.

A few summers ago during a brutal heat wave, a man named Jerry came into the clinic drunk on a Friday afternoon, his clothes stuck to his body from a rash. O'Sullivan and her nurses patiently soaked the clothes off him, bathed him, rubbed cream over him, dressed and wrapped his wounds. They gave him food and new clothes. "Nobody's ever been this kind to me before," Jerry told O'Sullivan, who asked him to check back in on Monday. He never came.

A few days later, police found Jerry dead in an alley, still in the clothes O'Sullivan had given him.

"We didn't know it at the time," she recalls, "but we prepared his body for burial. That's what you do -- you bathe, you anoint and you wrap."

O'Sullivan accepts that this is all a part of the cycle of life, like in her garden. "Seeds grow into big plants and bear fruit," she says. "But then they grow old, die and fall back into the earth so that new life can come."