



Anne L. Maitland, MD, PhD,
Assistant Professor of Medicine
(Clinical Immunology)

Dr. Anne Maitland is educating doctors and patients to help the Harlem community breathe a little easier.

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Considering all the time and effort it takes to earn a doctorate, attract funding, and establish a laboratory, it’s rare for a young investigator to walk away from a promising career in basic research.

Anne L. Maitland, MD, PhD, Assistant Professor, did exactly that about a decade ago, realizing that she could have more influence on asthma care as a clinician and an educator — two of her roles as a clinical immunologist at Mount Sinai.

As Anne sees it, there are two main reasons why people with asthma don’t get the care they need. First, many, if not most, doctors don’t perform routine screening for the disease, and second, many people don’t realize they have asthma or they underestimate its severity. That’s a particularly dangerous combination in communities like East Harlem, where asthma rates are among the highest in the nation.

Anne’s solution is to improve asthma awareness among physicians as well as patients.

As for the first, she’s designing a curriculum for medical residents so that when they enter practice, they’ll know exactly how to screen, manage, and counsel patients with asthma.

To primary care doctors who say they cannot squeeze yet another task into the routine patient visit, she replies, “In five minutes or so, I can screen for asthma, explain the condition, and teach the patient what they need to do. And if I can’t do it all in one visit, I have the patient come back, which is a good way to build a rapport and reinforce adherence to their asthma plan.”

It is well worth the effort, she says. “If you stop asthma up front, you prevent the emergency department visits and the hospitalizations.”

In her spare time, Anne also takes her show on the road, to local churches and community centers, where she conducts evening and weekend asthma screenings and educational seminars. “You have to bring the care to the community,” she says. “Most people with respiratory problems won’t go to the doctor unless they can’t breathe comfortably or stop coughing. They acclimate down to what their lungs let them do, rationalizing, for example, that they can’t climb stairs because they haven’t been exercising.”

At one event, she screened 61 people and recorded 18 abnormal breathing tests. “They all had insurance, and they all had primary care physicians, but none of the 18 knew that they had a breathing problem,” she notes.

“My goal is not to undermine the relationship that they have with their primary care physicians but to augment it,” she is quick to add. “In fact, I give them their test results to take back to their physicians.”

Surprisingly, Anne’s newfound role in community outreach doesn’t come naturally. “I was always the one in the back of the classroom,” she admits. “And I was perfectly happy at the laboratory bench. But I found that I can do more in this role. There are a lot of smart people at Mount Sinai who can do basic research, but to translate what happens at the bench to the care that patients need, that’s my niche.”