



# Health Café Series: a Potential Platform to Reduce Health Disparities

Wai Hong (Kevin) Lo<sup>1</sup> · Cato T. Laurencin<sup>1</sup>

Received: 30 October 2019 / Revised: 2 June 2020 / Accepted: 5 June 2020 / Published online: 15 June 2020  
© W. Montague Cobb-NMA Health Institute 2020

## Abstract

To help bridge the increasing gap between health scientists/physicians and the community, we have developed a new seminar program—Health Café series. Health Café takes place in casual settings, is open to everyone, and features a keynote speaker regarding prevalent healthcare-related topics. Health Café topics are usually generated via community feedback and are coordinated in partnership with local nonprofit community organizations. The Health Café series is completely free, and no prior knowledge is required to attend seminars. We have been collaborating with a web of community organizations in the Hartford areas of Connecticut, especially among populations with health disparities. We believe our new Health Café series program would serve as a forum to reduce health disparities in the region.

**Keywords** Health disparities · Health café · Physical wellness

In late 2018, the Connecticut Convergence Institute for Translation in Regenerative Engineering at UConn Health was established on 4 principles: education, innovation, collaboration, and community. The Connecticut Convergence Institute strives to educate and nurture new, emerging, and future scientists; increase the number of innovative translational research projects and move discoveries into the community quickly and effectively; and work collaboratively with regional and national stakeholders to eliminate health disparities.

We work to promote education and innovative convergence research across the campus and in the community. It is worth noting that our institute is skilled at bringing together faculty, clinicians, and researchers for in-depth conversations on current scientific topics. Funded by the Aetna Foundation, we have created a Health Café series that builds on the success of Science Cafes [1, 2]. Science Cafés have been present since the 1990s, and these are the events that take place in casual settings such as restaurants, local pubs, bookstores, library, and coffee shops, are open to everyone, and feature an engaging conversation with a scientist about a particular topic related to science [1]. Since then, several other groups have taken a

similar strategy to bring academicians and community members to discuss a variety of science topics [3, 4].

Our Health Café series at University of Connecticut was developed in early 2019 in order to bring scientists, physicians, health policy makers, local and state government agencies, and the community at large together on a regular basis and discuss various health topics which range from diet, exercise, vaping, mental health, and more. The new Health Café concept encourages physician-scientists to make health sciences/healthcare concept more accessible to community. We also believe that the Health Café program will positively influence academic achievement for medical students when it takes place in medical schools. The unique feature of our Health Café program is community-initiated and organized in conjunction with local nonprofit community organizations (please see Table 1). It is important to note that our Health Café program has been establishing and collaborating with a web of community organizations surrounding the inner city of Hartford of Connecticut (Fig. 1), which are representative of the target underserved populations. These organizations include faith-based organizations the First Cathedral in Bloomfield, CT; the Emanuel Lutheran Church in Hartford, CT, nonprofit organizations (YMCA of Great Hartford, YWCA of Great Hartford, and Urban League of Greater Hartford), and faculty/staff from UConn and UConn Health (Table 2). Health Café may serve as an effective forum to increase community understanding, trust-building, and community empowerment especially among the groups with health disparities. Therefore, it is believed that another

✉ Cato T. Laurencin  
laurencin@uchc.edu

<sup>1</sup> Connecticut Convergence Institute for Translation in Regenerative Engineering, School of Medicine, University of Connecticut Health Center, Farmington, CT 06030, USA

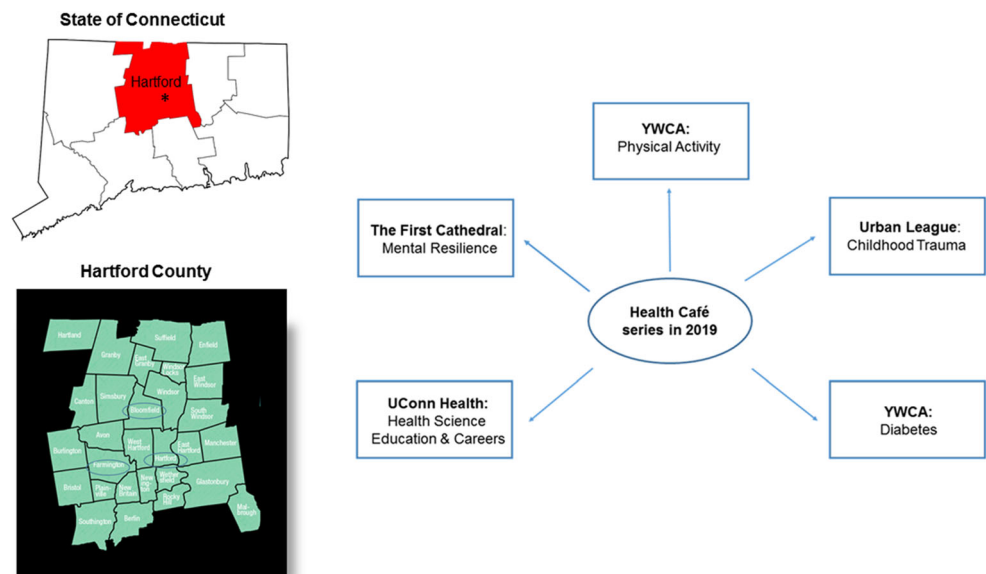
**Table 1** Hosting a Health Café event

Roles	Academic unit	Community organization
A	Identifying speakers who have expertise in the subject	Identifying the Health Café topic from the community members
B	Invite faculty, fellows, and students who have interest in community health issues	Invite community members
C	Design promotional materials agenda and event survey form	Identifying secure Health Café location and catering
D	Provide financial resources (e.g., funding, FTE)	Provide financial resources (e.g., funding FTE)
E	Provide post-event marketing and survey data analysis	Provide post-event marketing

mission our new Health Café program could able to reduce health disparities in the region. On May 29, 2019, the Connecticut Convergence Institute and the YWCA Hartford launched the first ever Health Café kickoff event. The goal of this event was to enlighten the community about the importance of starting or maintaining a healthy lifestyle and to present it in an upbeat and relatable fashion. During the event, keynote speakers discussed the current health crisis (obesity) not only locally but also on a national and global scale as well. Attendees left the event armed with healthy lifestyle information, free gifts, and stomachs full of delicious, healthy food. Evaluating the impact of each Health Café on participants’ disposition toward healthcare topics was carried out by surveys and/or follow-up questionnaires. We had hosted 5 Health Café series in 2019 (Fig. 1), reaching hundreds of community members in the Hartford areas of Connecticut. We have

planned to host 10–12 Health Café events for 2020 and 2021. We will expand the Health Café topics according to the needs expressed by our partner organizations (e.g., COVID-19 pandemic, weight loss, plant-based whole foods, chronic pain relief). We will also invite more local nonprofit community organizations who are very interested to become a partner of this program. The Health Café has proven to be a mixture of healthcare topics and fun, offering an intellectual discussion in an informal social setting. The Connecticut Convergence Institute believes that the future of health science is collaboration to generate new ideas and, beyond that, convergence, which includes bringing together not only people who are like-minded and work in the same area but also people who are in disparate areas and pursue health science in different ways to create new ways of thinking to solve problems. We have created a Health Café series program that

**Fig. 1** The themes of the Health Café series in 2019 and the community organization partners in the Hartford areas of Connecticut. Hartford County (red color) is a county located in the north central part of Connecticut. The population was about 900,000 accord to the 2010 census, making it the second most populous county in Connecticut. \* is the downtown Hartford City which is the state capitol



**Table 2** Community organizations in the Hartford County of Connecticut for our Health Café series program

---

The name of the community organization and their missions

---

**The First Cathedral**

The First Cathedral is committed to serving the people of our communities, the nation at large, and the entire world. With 40 acres of land, over 11,000 members, and a 3000 seat facility, the First Cathedral is a state-of-the-art facility which is not only used for church functions but a variety of large capacity purposes throughout the year such as conferences, educational classes, and more (<https://thefirstcathedral.org/explore/our-mission/>)

**Emanuel Lutheran Church**

Emanuel Lutheran Church extends to people of any gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, race, culture, physical or mental ability, economic circumstances, relationship status, or any person who has ever experienced pain or oppression (<https://emanuelhartford.org/about/>)

**YWCA Hartford Region**

YWCA Hartford Region is dedicated to eliminating racism, empowering women, and promoting peace, justice, freedom, and dignity for all. YWCA promotes change at a systemic level and through improved lives for individuals and families in our community. Increasingly, the paramount theme is for every woman to achieve economic security. YWCA pursues its mission through advocacy, programs, and services (<https://www.ywcahartford.org/>)

**Urban League of Greater Hartford**

The Urban League of Greater Hartford is one of the affiliate offices of the National Urban League. Its mission is to enable African Americans and other residents of the Hartford region to secure economic self-reliance, parity, and power and civil rights. Urban League of Greater Hartford remains the only professionally started not-for-profit, community-based agency targeted to the Greater Hartford African American community (<http://www.ulgh.org/>)

**YMCA of Greater Hartford**

The YMCA of Greater Hartford is a charitable association open to all and committed to helping people develop their fullest potential in spirit, mind, and body. This commitment is reinforced by the belief in living out universal values of caring, honesty, respect, and responsibility (<https://www.ghymca.org/>)

**UConn Health**

UConn Health is the branch of the University of Connecticut that oversees clinical care, advanced health science research, and academic education in medicine. Located in Farmington of the Hartford County, UConn Health is dedicated to helping people achieve and maintain healthy lives and restoring wellness/health to maximum attainable levels (<https://health.uconn.edu>)

---

fosters an energetic, unscripted dialogue in the Hartford area. More importantly, the health topic and the conversation are controlled as much by the audience as the community partners. We urge other academic units to launch similar Health Café initiatives to encourage more underserved community members to engage with health science and technology.

**Acknowledgments** We would like to thank the team, Dr. Helen Wu, Ms. Melanie Burnat, and Ms. Michelle Slivinsky, at the Connecticut Convergence Institute who have been helping us to organize the Health Café events.

**Funding Information** This work was supported by the funding from the Aetna Foundation.

## References

1. Ahmed S, DeFino MC, Connors ER, Kissack A, Franco Z. Science cafés: engaging scientists and community through health and science dialogue. *Clin Transl Sci.* 2014;7(3):196–200.
2. Ahmed SM, DeFino M, Connors E, Visotcky A, Kissack A, Franco Z. Science Cafés: transforming citizens to scientific citizens-what influences participants' perceived change in health and scientific literacy? *J Clin Transl Sci.* 2017;1(2):129–34.
3. Balls-Berry JE, Sinicrope PS, Valdez Soto MA, Albertie ML, Lafflam R, Major-Elechi BT, et al. Using Garden Cafés to engage community stakeholders in health research. *PLoS One.* 2018 Aug 10;13(8):e0200483.
4. Adhikari B, Hlaing PH, Robinson MT, Ruecker A, Tan NH, Jatupompimol N, et al. Evaluation of the pint of science festival in Thailand. *PLoS One.* 2019;14(7):e0219983.

**Publisher's Note** Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.