funds coming from federal and state sources, including Medicare, Medicaid, Medicaid Managed Care, Commonwealth Care, and the state’s Health Safety Net Trust Fund (formerly the “free care pool”). Despite continuing financial uncertainties, the system continues to provide a major safety net of services—not only physicians and nurses, but social workers, mental-health providers, and cultural interpreters—to large numbers of uninsured and under-insured patients who would otherwise have to rely on emergency-room care.

Since its founding, Cambridge Hospital, now CHA, has attracted a distinct breed of doctors: those who tend to be less interested in high-paying, medical-specialty career paths than in the chance to improve the well-being of those at the bottom of the healthcare ladder. Daniel McCormick joined CHA as a full-time faculty member in 1997, eager to combine his interest in family medicine with “a passion for social justice.” In his primary-care practice in Somerville, he treats a steady stream of low-income patients, many of them immigrants from Haiti, Brazil and elsewhere in Latin America, and the Middle East. With help from on-site interpreters employed by CHA, he takes time to discuss patients’ family situations, working conditions, and daily habits—recognizing that much of the optimal care of patients takes place outside the doctor’s office. “Sometimes there’s economic stress or a mental-health condition that keeps patients from complying with a drug regimen or following up on appointments,” he explains. “Other times it can be a matter of cultural resistance.” If a test or treatment sounds frightening, some patients opt for home remedies instead. McCormick works closely with patients’ family members (many of whom are also his patients), and with social workers, to address the life issues that may be impeding treatment.

In lectures and in the clinic, McCormick and his colleagues impart this “big picture” approach to students. “Those who choose to train here know that they are going to gain exposure to a patient population and a teaching philosophy that differs from other hospitals in the Harvard system,” explains Davidson.