Upping the care factor

Early admission program aims to improve doctor numbers in rural Oklahoma.

Story by Lorene A. Roberson  Photography by Gary Lawson

They tag along on physicians’ daily rounds in small towns. They watch as uninsured patients’ needs are determined. They scrawl notes on index cards and stuff them in the pockets of their white jackets.

Their job: observe patient care in communities where doctors are hard to come by.
This spring, four aspiring doctors were admitted to the Oklahoma State University College of Medicine through the Rural and underserved Primary Care Early Admissions Program. They will finish their undergraduate degrees at OSU in May of 2013, and begin medical school that fall.

The students are part of a new plan designed to provide a solution to a chronic problem in Oklahoma — the shortage of primary care physicians in rural areas.

“The Early Admissions Program has a specific mission, and that is to serve rural and underserved Oklahoma. Our four students want to help those communities in need. We are excited to see them tackle a critical issue in Oklahoma,” says Amy Martindale, director of student academic services in the OSU College of Arts and Sciences.

Juniors Jessica Branstetter of Perkins, Chá Reeder of Stillwater, David McVay of Tulsa and senior Maria Vachapittack of Stillwater are the program’s inaugural class.

Martindale says the four are passionate about the new endeavor. “Osteopathic medicine’s appeal to many of our students is its philosophy of taking care of patients holistically, not just focusing on the specific symptom presented today,” she says. “These students are also dedicated to primary care, to meet the general medical needs in rural and underserved communities.”

EARLY RECOGNITION

The OSU College of Arts and Sciences in Stillwater and the OSU College of Osteopathic Medicine in Tulsa are collaborating on the plan. The OSU College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources also is taking part in the unique venture.

Under the program, students take pre-medical courses on the Stillwater campus for three years before starting medical training during their fourth — or senior — year. They earn a bachelor’s degree in four years and an osteopathic medical degree in three more.

“We want to identify students who show early signs of interest in rural medicine. We want to keep their talents in our state and make sure they are successful,” says Dr. William Pettit, associate dean at the OSU Center for Rural Health. “It’s a phenomenal thing to start this program, and we are thrilled to be working with the College of Arts and Sciences.”

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The curriculum took more than a year for the three units to develop, and at first glance, the requirements are standard pre-med.

In the summer between their sophomore and junior years, however, the requirements are stepped up, with the students required to complete a three-week externship with a practicing osteopathic physician. In their junior year, students participate in primary care shadowing experiences.

Students also join the OSU Student Osteopathic Rural Medicine Club — known as StORM, a name created by the group’s first set of officers in 2008. “The first officers wanted to be more than just a club; they wanted to storm Oklahoma by meeting with legislators, dignitaries, townspeople and new students to address rural health,” says Pettit, the club’s adviser.

StORM’s main goal is to serve as representatives on both the state and national level. “In the long run, we want our students to become spokespeople,” Pettit says.

A LOVE FOR MEDICINE

A microbiology major, Jessica Branstetter externed in July with Dr. Jennifer Ferrell of Stillwater. The externship, which is shorter than an internship, was a natural transition for the 19-year-old. For the last five years, she has volunteered at Stillwater Medical Center, where she now works as a clerical assistant in the ER.

Branstetter says she always knew she wanted to be a doctor.

“I have always wanted to be in the medical field. I … wanted to get through high school quickly so I could do what I really wanted to do, which was medicine,” she says.

With that in mind, she graduated a year early from Perkins-Tryon High School as valedictorian of her class. OSU’s rigorous program does not faze Branstetter in the least.

“I am really excited about this medical program,” she says. “Most of my family lives in Oklahoma. This is where I want to be.”

‘GIVE THEM HOPE’

With Dr. Dustin Cupp, David McVay walked the halls of Cushing Regional Hospital, a 95-bed hospital that serves the Oklahoma communities of Cushing, Drumright, Ripley, Agra, Perkins, Yale, Oilton and Stroud.

The physiology major went to morning and afternoon clinics and on patient rounds with Cupp. On one Tuesday evening, they worked at the county’s free medical clinic. And while he could not treat the patients, McVay listened.

CONTINUES

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While in the various clinics, he heard stories from multigenerational households about caring for wounds, farming accidents and job losses. He met families who had no jobs, no insurance and little hope.

“We would talk about their physical, emotional and spiritual health, along with the importance of being a family,” McVay, 21, says. “Everyone has family problems, so it’s good when you can feel for your patients, and it’s OK to think about them the day, the week, the month after.

“It’s good to give them hope and encouragement.”

Cushing was McVay’s first rural experience after working with urban communities for more than four years.

During his senior year of high school, he dedicated each Tuesday to volunteering for Good Samaritan Health Services in poor areas of Tulsa. “The area was very rough; however, being there helped give me more compassion and a clearer vision,” he says.

“My experience with Good Samaritan was when I first decided to commit to a long-term vision of helping people through health care.”

‘FASCINATING’

The 20-year-old Chá Reeder, a microbiology major, tagged along with Ferrell in August. The doctor-in-training calls the experience fascinating. “I want to go into general practice, so it was great to observe patients with all different needs.”

Reeder, a Stillwater native and a self-proclaimed Cowboys fan since birth, says she has always wanted to stay within the OSU family. During high school, she toured the medical school once and later toured it as a college student — several times.

“I fell in love with the program and its family appeal. I also appreciate how none of the medical students are fighting to be in a No. 1 spot, but rather everyone is working together.”

OSU’s osteopathic medicine approach appealed to Reeder, too: “Viewpoints are changing, and there’s more of a focus on preventative medicine,” she says. “Instead of being stuffed full of medicines, people are looking for better ways of living. And osteopathic medicine’s way of treating diseases and the entire body works with that.”
Maria Vachapittack’s path differs from her younger colleagues. Her academic career started at the University of Nebraska, where she earned bachelor’s and master’s degrees in theater. At 25, while she was pregnant with her first child, she became enchanted with medicine.

“My doctor asked me what I wanted to do with my theater degrees. With deadpan humor, I said ‘go into medicine,’ ” she says. “I was very serious, though, and decided to give up a regular paycheck and follow my gut and heart and go into science.

“It is a gamble that has paid off.”

At OSU, she is working on a degree in university studies. This summer in Muskogee, Okla., Vachapittack externed with Dr. Michael Stratton of the Children’s Clinic, doing morning rounds and attending Oklahoma State Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs Control Commission meetings, where Stratton is a member.

“I was impressed by the depth of knowledge Dr. Stratton possesses, his kindness and warmth toward patients and his good nature,” Vachapittack says. “He’s a great physician.”

Vachapittack admits she loves getting a jumpstart on medical school. “Who wouldn’t jump on this opportunity? I have a lot of higher education, and I wanted to get into the classes that I would really use as a doctor,” the 27-year-old says.

“OSU’s early admission program helped that decision, but both my husband and I have really fallen for Oklahoma’s charm. I’m drawn to the beauty of the land here.”

She’s also drawn to medicine — rural, to be specific. “There’s an extreme need for doctors in this area of medicine and in Oklahoma. I was overjoyed when the OSU Center for Health Sciences came to Stillwater with the news of this early admissions program.

“I would never take back this decision, and I bet if you talk with me in a year, I’ll be even more gung ho and even more enthused. I love people, and being a doctor seems the perfect choice for me.”

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