

THE WORKFORCE PIPELINE

UND's Center for Rural Health works to gain interest in health careers

BY AMANDA SCURRY

Youth are often asked what they want to be when they grow up.

The Center for Rural Health at the University of North Dakota (UND) School of Medicine and Health Sciences hopes their answers will be health-care related.

Workforce shortages are a challenge for the health care system nationwide with projected physician shortages between 85,000 and 96,000 by 2020, according to the Federal Council on Graduate Medical Education.

“These shortages can negatively affect health care quality and access to health care services,” says Mary Amundson, Center for Rural Health assistant professor. “Shortages can increase stress on available providers and contribute to higher health care costs by increasing the use of overtime pay and expensive temporary personnel.”

A year ago, the Center for Rural Health, in partnership with the Dakota Medical Foundation and others, hosted a Health Care Workforce Summit to examine health care workforce issues in North Dakota. The purpose of the summit was to share current practices to feed the state's health care workforce pipeline, to explore current and emerging challenges associated with the supply and demand of health care workers in the state, and to begin to develop an action plan to address these challenges. Participants included state legislators, statewide organizations, economic development commissions, health care employers, educators and providers.

The pipeline

Staff at the Center for Rural Health uses the idea of a workforce pipeline to explain that interest in health careers starts at a young age and must continue through several steps.

“Each step of the pipeline offers opportunities to target specific strategies from workforce training to retention,” explains Patricia Moulton, Center for Rural Health assistant professor.

During the summit, participants identified goals and key issues within each step, barriers to achieving the goals, elements needing change and action steps.

K-12 students

Summit attendees indicated a need to increase student exposure to health care professions through education and business partnerships. They wanted to provide more students with age-appropriate experiences in health care facilities including tours, presentations and related activities to introduce students to health care professions.

The North Dakota Medicare Rural Hospital Flexibility Program at the Center for Rural Health has funded several such endeavors throughout the state. The Fostering Opportunities in Rural Health Occupations program funds community partnerships to expose children to health occupations with the intent of increasing their awareness, interest and understanding of health careers.

One of these programs in Park River, N.D., made strides in educating the community's fifth-graders about health careers. First Care Health Center in Park River partnered with Park River School to do a five-week program they called Inspector Well Ness and the Care of the Many Medical Careers.

Medical professionals visited fifth-grade classrooms each week to discuss their careers and provide a hands-on activity relating to their chosen field. Students heard from

physician assistants and nurse practitioners, paramedics, laboratory and imaging technicians, physical therapists, nurses and dietitians. The students viewed X-rays, tried on

a cast, had their blood pressure monitored and took a ride in an ambulance, among other activities. They also visited the health center to see the equipment and meet more health professionals.

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Ruth Jelinek, First Care Health Center

who led the project for First Care Health Center. "Most of the students didn't know what these medical careers were."

The students were tested on their knowledge of health careers before and after the program. Before the five-week program, only a few students correctly matched health careers with a description of that



Lois Mathiason of First Care Health Center in Park River, N.D., shares the Inspector Well Ness and the Care of the Many Medical Careers program with fifth-graders.

career. However, when they were tested after the program, there was marked improvement.

Higher education students

Summit attendees acknowledged a need to engage community and education programs to educate undergraduate students about health care programs.

MeritCare Health System and the UND medical school's internal medicine residency program in Fargo have been working with Concordia College in neighboring Moorhead, Minn., for a number of years to provide pre-med students with a real-life picture of what health careers are like.

The cooperative education class gives students credit for observing physicians and volunteering in hospitals and nursing homes. Students spend a half a day a week in the internal medicine residency clinic. They spend an additional 35 hours a semester with mentoring physicians, either job shadowing or conversing about medical careers.

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The class also visits the UND medical school for a day and participates in its Patient-Centered Learning curriculum.

“They observe how care is delivered and visit with residents on what it is like to go through medical school and residency,” says Dr. Julie Blehm, UND School of Medicine and Health Sciences Southeast Campus associate dean. “They get realistic impressions of what medicine is.”

Higher education programs

Summit attendees also discussed designing rural interdisciplinary education programs for all health care disciplines and increasing the number of rural training programs statewide. They suggested an assessment of current programs and the potential for establishing other programs and collaborations along with further development of a rural curriculum.

In recent years, the Fargo-based Dakota Medical Foundation has supported efforts to increase health care training in the state, especially in rural areas. The foundation has contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars to higher education institutions throughout the state to support efforts to make their programs more accessible to rural residents and to make health students more interested in careers in the rural areas. These projects include increasing the number of seats in nursing programs,

establishing distance education programs in rural areas, and providing scholarships to health profession students who intend to remain in the area.

Employer recruitment and retention

Recruitment and retention of health care providers is the most immediate section of the pipeline. With fewer and fewer medical students choosing family medicine and other primary care fields, it is especially difficult for small rural communities to find physicians.

One North Dakota community, Cando, recently had success in recruiting a physician by involving the entire community and his entire family. Dr. Robert Hamilton is currently a third-year physician-resident at UND's Minot Center for Family Medicine. He was first introduced to the community by Cando physician Dr. Greg Culver, who precepts at the Minot program. Culver convinced Hamilton to spend his one-month rural rotation in Cando, which started a series of regular visits between Cando residents and the Hamiltons.



Dr. Julie Blehm advises Katrina Enderle, a senior pre-med student from Concordia College who shadows residents at the clinic.

The Hamiltons were welcomed by the hospital CEO and staff, and the community reached out to them, including hospital board members, real estate agents, patients and other community members. While in Cando, citizens treated the Hamiltons to the best the community has to offer, including trail rides, trap shooting and Devils Lake. The result was a successful bid for Hamilton start his practice in Cando.

Next steps

To continue the work begun at the summit, the State Office of Rural Health program at the Center for Rural Health is funding a statewide Health Care Workforce Committee that includes individuals representing state boards, state associations, medical facilities (urban, rural and Veterans Administration), long-term care, health and human services and academic and economic development.